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Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

A WAR OF PRIMOGENITORS



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15 STRIKE THE BLOOD

A WAR OF PRIMOGENITORS

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer



Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Dimitrie Vattler
Duke of Ardeal
Frivolous noble
and Master of Serpents



Avrora Florestina

Dodekatos

Sleeping princess and last of
the Kaleid Bloods

Nagisa Akatsuki

Sister of the Primogenitor

Innocent, blooming, boisterous,
and wise little sister

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STRIKE THE BLOOD

A WAR OF PRIMOGENITORS

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 15

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

Numerous gloomy voices bounced around a chamber.

This place was known as the Garden of Whispers.

At the center of the chamber was a round, scarlet table. Twelve seats were arranged around it, though three were vacant. “Kings”—leaders of various nations—sat in the remaining nine. Emperors, presidents, chancellors, chairmen—the nine were international leaders, selected from the countries participating in the Holy Ground Treaty. Silver masks concealed their faces, and sorcery altered their voices, so no one could identify who was whispering.

“It would seem Akishige Yaze has been overthrown,” a masked “King” whispered.

“Indeed,” another masked King replied, “In Itogami Island—the Far East Demon Sanctuary?”

“Surely this poses no special concern. We expected his plan would eventually collapse. If anything, should we not view Tartarus Lapse’s actions as fortuitous?”

“This makes nine Beast Vassals that serve Kojou Akatsuki. However, there is one upon which he has maintained a complete seal.”

“An incomplete mockery of a primogenitor, nothing more. Now that the Root’s memory is lost, the current Fourth Primogenitor is just a single, powerful vampire who poses no threat to us.”

“Agreed. The danger of the Fourth Primogenitor is not at a level requiring countermeasures.”

“Certainly, the one we should be wary of is Magna Ataraxia Research. Its influence over the Demon Sanctuary has grown commensurate with Akishige Yaze’s fall from power, to the extent that we can no longer ignore them.”

“We need merely inflict pain... A punishment suitable for a dog that does not know its place.”

“Damn profiteers and their lust for money. It would be best if they heeded our admonition, but...”

“Then you do not mind leaving the Priestess of Cain to her own devices?”

“For now, that is our only option. So long as the altar called Itogami Island exists, any hope of harm befalling her will be futile. If we were resigned to the loss of a Demon Sanctuary, that would be another matter—”

“Unacceptable. The island still has its uses.”

“Then, we postpone dealing with the girl. Let all treaty participants be advised that unnecessary contact with her is to be—”

“—Objection.”

Suddenly, a new voice echoed, and the many whispering voices turned silent.

Though the masks concealed the Kings’ faces, their agitation was plain.

Abruptly, they realized that the three supposedly vacant seats at the round table...had been filled.

These three Kings, having never once shown themselves since the formation of the Holy Ground Treaty, had appeared at that late hour. These three were standing members that, in the Garden of Whispers, had been granted special veto rights. In other words, these were the Lords of the Dominions.

“The situation has changed. The Master of Serpents from the Warlord’s Empire has obtained knowledge of The Cleansing,” solemnly stated one King.

In an instant, the silence turned to commotion.

These were the three kings whose very existence was often doubted—the vampire primogenitors. Everyone at that round table understood the purpose of their arrival.

“Sooner or later, that man will surely make use of the Legacy. If so, this would pose a grave threat to us all.”

“Accordingly, we shall accede to your request and launch a military

expedition.”

“Its orders shall be: Destroy the Far East Demon Sanctuary...”

Amid the gloom, the conference came to an end.

The kings removed their silver masks, leaving the Garden of Whispers behind them.

The only things left at that scarlet table were twelve masks, which would say nothing.

The group’s decision—Itogami Island must be destroyed.



A girl looked out at the sea.

She had hair the color of honey and suntanned skin like someone from a southern nation. She was in her midteens. Her exquisite olive skin was complemented by a vivid priestess outfit from a foreign nation, which suited her well.

Adorning her bountiful breasts was a golden necklace encrusted with jade. Engraved into it was the image of a leopard’s skull. This was the emblem of the Dominion that governed Central America, the Chaos Zone.

That she bore this emblem marked her as a subject, and the Third Primogenitor—the Chaos Bride—as her liege.

Her name was Celesta Ciate.

Previously, the girl had been called the Bride of the Dark God who brought calamity unto the world and acted as his avatar. The Dark God had already been annihilated, but Celesta’s priestess power to control dragon lines still remained. Harboring an interest in that power, the Chaos Bride, on a whim, at some point pinned upon Celesta the title of Lady of the Court of the Chaos Zone. Yet, she was Lady of the Court in name only; her actual duty was to be the friend and playmate of a Third Primogenitor with far too much time on her hands.

It was this Celesta who gazed at the sea at dusk. The last vestiges of sunlight dyed the horizon the color of fresh blood. The dark surface of the sea mingled with the night sky, shrouding the world in darkness.

The coastal breeze rustled her hair.

She was standing on the top deck of an enormous ship.

Its total length was 280 meters, with a loaded displacement of fifty thousand metric tons. Equipped with four large-scale spiritual reactors, this was the amphibious landing ship *Soufrière*—and she stood on its aft flight deck.

The destination of *Soufrière*, flagship of the Chaos Zone’s Pacific Fleet, was Japan. More specifically, it was the Demon Sanctuary, located some 330 kilometers south of Tokyo Metropolis.

To Celesta, the artificial isle dubbed Itogami Island held precious memories. That was likely why the Chaos Bride had named Celesta as one of the subordinates to accompany her there.

However, Celesta turned a hardened expression toward the land she so loved. After all, the *Soufrière* had been set into motion to bring about Itogami Island’s destruction.

“Lord Vattler... Why...?”

Celesta posed the question over the horizon.

Her murmur was erased by the roar of turboprop engines reverberating overhead.

Known popularly as the air fleet, a horde of huge airships passed over the *Soufrière*’s airspace. Their destination was Itogami Island as well.

There were a total of seven flying warships comprising the air fleet. The surface ship armada accompanying the *Soufrière* included destroyers and cruisers, fifteen in total. Furthermore, a pair of spiritual reactor–powered attack submarines had been assigned to support the fleet. It was an overabundance of military might, sufficient to wipe a small country off the map in a single night.

Even for the Chaos Zone, it should have been impossible to assemble such a vast fleet on its own. The same surely went for the Warlord’s Empire and the Fallen Dynasty.

Then, what was the truth behind that fleet? One that, by rights, should not have existed—?

It was the name under which the fleet sailed—the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military—that provided the answer. In truth, the armada belonged to the multinational military alliance originating from the Holy Ground Treaty. Assembled from nations around the globe, it was the mightiest military force in the world.

Fighting that fleet was tantamount to making the entire world your enemy. Certainly, there were none who could withstand its strength. Not even the World's Mightiest Vampire.

“Kojou Akatsuki...”

Murmuring the name of her friend, Celesta bit her lip hard.

Her voice did not reach the boy.



CHAPTER ONE
SIGNS OF DISASTER

CHAPTER ONE

SIGNS OF DISASTER

1

“True, I promised Nagisa I’d go out and shop for her today...”

Wearing the hood of his parka so it partially covered his eyes, Kojou Akatsuki listlessly shook his head.

He was at a specially prepared event space at Thetis Mall, Itogami Island’s largest amalgamated commercial structure.

The spacious, wide-open hall was full of glossy glass showcases with beautiful little pastries displayed as if they were precious gemstones. Curious customers had gathered all around, packing the narrow corridor to the brim, with fierce struggles over rare commodities taking place inside the shops.

The throngs possessed a bloodlust rivaling that of a packed electric train in a major city.

The one saving grace was that the vast majority of the customers assembled there were young women.

“All the same, I didn’t hear one damn word about it being a place selling Valentine chocolates. I feel really, reeeally uncomfortable here, okay?!”

“These are... These are for Valentine’s Day...”

Yukina Himeragi, bewildered and frozen in place, murmured this with a trembling voice. It had not even been half a year since she had come to the island. This was her first time seeing with her own eyes the fiercely fought Valentine chocolate wars specific to Itogami Island.

On Itogami Island, far removed from the mainland, the high-class chocolates for gift giving were not imported in large quantities, because the shipping costs

were prohibitive due to the hot, humid climate.

Furthermore, a Demon Sanctuary had special circumstances; even within the nation of Japan, Itogami Island was the only place to obtain commodities that suited the palates of vampires, beast people, artificial life-forms, and any other diversities of demons.

With all these circumstances lumped together, at this time of year, Western-style pastry shops on the island were sites of constant chocolate strife, portraits of Hell painted in blood and washed away by more blood.

“Geez, why does Nagisa need me to pick up obligatory chocolates for that shitty dad of ours...? I mean, at a time like this, it’s hard for a guy to even get close to a chocolate store...”

Kojou’s lips twisted in distaste as he looked down at the high-end pastry-shop bags he was clenching in both hands.

That day, Kojou’s role was to be his little sister’s errand boy. Inside the bags were enormous amounts of chocolates Nagisa would give to their father and her classmates. Even though Kojou knew they were just cheap obligatory chocolates, walking around with presents his little sister was giving to other guys didn’t make him feel warm and fuzzy.

As Kojou sulked, Yukina trained an exasperated stare on him.

“I don’t think you need to dwell on it. In the first place, I believe it’s customary to give gifts on that day regardless of a person’s gender.”

“I hear you, but why celebrate Valentine’s Day in a Demon Sanctuary? Wasn’t that some European festival for some saint?”

Most of the heroes hailed as saints were people who had achieved great feats in combat against demons in the days of old—in other words, they were demons’ enemies. He didn’t think that festivals for such people were very appropriate for neutral territory like a Demon Sanctuary.

However, Yukina smiled and shook her head.

“No, it would seem that Valentine’s Day originated with a festival in the honor of an ancient goddess of marriage. I believe that linking it to the name of a saint

was an invention of a later age. In the first place, the custom of giving chocolates itself spread relatively recently.”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

A complex expression clouded Kojou’s face as he fell silent. Of course, even he knew that the recent custom of giving chocolates on Valentine’s Day was largely created by major pâtissiers themselves.

Yukina, however, gazed at the showcases of the chocolate-selling stores with an odd degree of admiration. “They even have a full line of chocolates for beast people. This truly is a Demon Sanctuary.”

“For beast people specifically?”

“Yes. After all, some beast people develop nausea, cramps, and other poisoning symptoms when they eat chocolate. So these ones do not contain the harmful components.”

“What are they, dogs...?” Kojou blurted out, surprised at that information.

Poisoning occurring from consuming chocolates containing theobromine was a symptom seen in many domestic pets such as dogs and cats. As a fellow Demon, he sympathized from the bottom of his heart with the beast people who experienced similar anguish.

“Besides, to think that products containing sorcerous components are sold to the general public... I had heard the rumors, but it still surprises me.”

“Sorcerous components...? Er, I don’t think it’s that big of a deal, really.”

Kojou made a small, pained smile when he noticed the poster stuck on a wall inside a shop. The pastries sold in the Demon Sanctuary included so-called Special Sorcerous Products, products containing Charm, aphrodisiacs, and similar effects. However, the magical effects were Category Four and below—the same level as a Charm made by an amateur, little more than a placebo.

“But it’s a little surprising that you know so much about Valentine’s Day, Himeragi. I figured chocolate wasn’t really your thing.”

“What kind of girl do you take me for...?”

Yukina sullenly tapered her lips into a visible pout. Having received rigorous

dawn-till-dusk training from the Lion King Agency ever since her youth, she had a high degree of knowledge as an Attack Mage and had combat capability drilled into her. On the other hand, she fell short in the department of common, everyday knowledge. Despite that, it seemed even she knew about Valentine's Day.

"Even at High God Forest, they sold chocolates just like everywhere else. In particular, Sayaka was very worked up around Valentine's each year..."

"Kirasaka, huh...? Yeah, I can picture that pretty easily..."

Kojou gave a deep nod of acceptance. Sayaka Kirasaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, absolutely loved to dote on her former roommate. She and Yukina had grown up together, and when they were younger, they were practically joined at the hip. When Valentine's Day came knocking, it was pretty much guaranteed she'd get excitable to an even greater extent than usual. He could picture her preparing handmade chocolates with a bizarre degree of enthusiasm.

In an attempt to bolster Kojou's deduction, Yukina smiled rather fondly. "Come to think of it, last year she gave me chocolates that she made from cacao beans."

"Made from pure cacao beans?!"

"It would seem they had been fermented for two weeks."

"No, no, no. I mean, even for handmade, that's a little intense, isn't it...?"

Naturally, Sayaka's dedication to Yukina was so outside his expectations that Kojou was at a loss for words. Perhaps Yukina sensed Kojou being thrown off his stride, for she hastily shook her head as she attempted to follow up.

"Oh, but the sweets Sayaka makes are quite delicious. After all, Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency have cooking skills drilled into them as part of their assassination training."

"Really...? That sort of makes me both want to try them and not want to..."

The "part of their assassination training" thing bugs me, though, thought Kojou as he turned straight toward Yukina.

“Come to think of it, can you make sweets, Himeragi?”

“Eh? ...Me?”

Kojou’s abrupt question caused Yukina’s eyes to waver, her bewilderment evident. However, she was not gazing at Kojou, but rather, behind him. Yukina’s lips trembled, as if wary of some danger.

“Haachaa—!”

“Whoa?!”

The bizarre voice from behind came with the downward swing of some dangerous object, which Kojou just barely evaded. A five-kilogram sack stuffed full of office-gift chocolates passed just in front of his eyes.

The one who had assaulted him with chocolate was a familiar face to Kojou—Motoki Yaze, the classmate he’d parted ways with at school not too long ago.

“Yaze, why you?! What gives, poppin’ out like that all of a sudden...?! For that matter, don’t use office-gift chocolates like a blunt weapon! That’s merchandise, you know!”

“What are you talkin’ about? All I’m doing is trying to deliver divine retribution to the traitor pretending not to have a girlfriend, nonchalantly tryin’ to get Himeragi here to make handmade chocolates for him.”

“Huh? The hell? It’s not like I’m demanding chocolates from someone like Himeragi, you know?!”

Without thinking, Kojou immediately refuted the accusation of a crime he did not remember committing. Upon hearing this, Yukina stiffened her expression, to the point where you could almost hear a glass-like *crack*.

“Chocolates from *someone like me*... Is that how you feel...?”

Yukina emotionlessly repeated her murmur in a voice almost too small for the others around her to hear. Yaze smiled with a smug, victorious leer.

“Listen here, Himeragi. A guy like this doesn’t need anyone handing him a single nibble of chocolate. Not even if this guy was stranded on a snowy mountain, going a week without food or drink!”

“Um, if I was stranded like that, at least gimme one chocolate to eat, geez...,” said Kojou, playing along despite his deadpan expression. “For that matter, what’s this traitor business? You’ve got a girlfriend of your own, dammit. Who was she, Koyomi in the third y—?”

“Kojou...you dare say that to me...”

Yaze groaned, thrusting a hand against a wall, leaning forward as if buckling under the strain of his misfortune. Kojou tilted his head, perplexed by just how easily his friend had fallen into such a blatantly crestfallen pose.

“Uh... Yaze?”

“My senpai goes to a cram school. Furthermore, she’s a third-year at our school, so when school attendance is voluntary, like right now, there’s no way she’d come to school!!”

“O-oh... S-sorry then...”

Feeling awkward, Kojou averted his gaze from Yaze. *If she’s using cram school as an excuse to not even give him chocolates, can I really call her his girlfriend anymore?* he questioned, but he thought better of saying that out loud.

“Um, if that is the case, why are you at a chocolate market, Yaze?”

Ascertaining that Yaze had no one with him, Yukina voiced a rather naive question. *Now that you mention it,* thought Kojou, eyeing his friend with suspicion.

“Then, what the heck are you doing in a place like this? You’re not tailing us, are you?”

“O-of course not, I came to buy chocolates! Chocolates, dammit!” Yaze frantically shouted, trying to vindicate his rather suspicious-seeming conduct and demeanor.

“You? Buying chocolates...?”

“Yeah. Lately, a new custom’s been making the rounds. It’s called Reverse Chocolates. Guys give ’em to girls instead of the other way around.”

“Oh...okay.”

Sounds like a cheap excuse, but I probably shouldn't pry any deeper, thought Kojou.

It was right around then that Nagisa slipped through a gap in the dense throng of female customers, returning with a Western sweetshop leaflet in hand.

“Yukina, Yukina! Which chocolates are we giving to the class reps? The ones with eight pieces or the ones with fifteen? I guess I’m worrying about quality versus quantity, huh? The fresh chocolates over there are really tasty, but I feel like Itogami Island temperatures will make them melt in no time...”

Perhaps because she was high-strung, Nagisa was speaking in an even faster rapid-fire pace than normal as she sought Yukina’s advice.

“Hmm,” went Kojou, glancing at the leaflets she was distributing. “I like the ones that aren’t supersweet. Also, ones with nuts in them.”

“...What are you talking about? Do you actually want me to give you chocolates, too, Kojou?”

Her large eyes fluttering, Nagisa looked up at Kojou in surprise. Yukina and Yaze both shot Kojou a cold glance, as if scolding him for his sister complex.

For his part, Kojou seemed thrown off by his little sister’s unexpectedly blunt reaction.

“Er, I mean, um... We’re family and all!”

“Hmm...but Kojou, even if you say that, you’ve been getting expensive chocolates from Asagi last year and the year before that, too,” his little sister said. “So I was thinking, it’s not like you really need me to go out of my way to give you any this year...”

“Uh, well, Asagi did give me some, but she said they were discount chocolates she got from the supermarket. I figured she got ’em cheap ’cause they were really close to their sell-by date, or something. Wait, those were expensive?”

“Discount chocolates...? Oh, Kojou, you are such a...!”

Righteous indignation ran across Nagisa’s face as she exhaled in a huff.

“There’s no way the chocolates Asagi gave Kojou were cheap! The reason

they had a short shelf life was because they're high-class products! Don't you know even that much...?!"

"Well, I guess I don't! And didn't you eat over half of last year's chocolates yourself?!"

"But they were so tasty— Uh, speak of Asagi, and she appears!"

Abruptly stretching her back higher, Nagisa gazed into the distance. Using a shopping mall escalator, Asagi Aiba was headed toward the train station. Even from a distance, her tastefully askew school uniform lent the high school girl a glamorous air.

"I wonder if Asagi came to buy chocolates, too. I'll call her over!"

"H-hey...!"

Faster than Kojou could call out to stop her, Nagisa broke into a run in pursuit of Asagi. *That girl just can't stand still*, thought Kojou, shaking his head with an air of resignation. Yukina giggled as she watched Kojou do so.

However, an oddly serious look came over Yaze as he stared at Asagi in the distance.

"What's up, Yaze?"

"Er... I'm just wondering, what's Asagi trying to pull here...?"

Kojou's question brought an absentminded murmur out of Yaze that seemed more to himself than to Kojou. Kojou thought that was suspicious, but the sound of a wild patter of footsteps accompanied the sight of Nagisa returning from the station.

"K-Kojou! This is huge! Come here for a minute!"

"What's the big deal?"

"Just come! Quick!"

With his little sister dragging him by the arm, Kojou relented and walked forward. Naturally, Yukina and Yaze accompanied them.

Asagi had already exited the shopping mall and was standing at a fountain in front of the station. That fountain, decorated with a statue of a penguin, was

one of Itogami Island's standard meeting spots. There, speaking to Asagi, was a young man with a handsome face that seemed as sharp as a cold blade.

The atmosphere was nothing like him spontaneously flirting. It seemed that the pair had intended to meet there together from the beginning.

"See? Look! Who is that guy? What's his relationship to Asagi?"

Still holding Kojou's arm, Nagisa pointed to them and raised her voice. However, Kojou did not respond to his little sister's question.

The scene was so shocking to him that he could not manage a reply.

"That's...Kira's partner..."

"Count Jagan...?!" Yukina picked up where Kojou's broken murmur trailed off.

The person Asagi was meeting was Tobias Jagan, aristocrat of the Warlord's Empire—an Old Guard vampire and said to be Dimitrie Vattler's right-hand man.

And as Kojou and the others watched, Asagi began walking with Jagan. The two were headed toward a parked, high-end, two-seater sports car. Jagan acted as Asagi's escort, helping her to her seat as he got in the driver's side. The sound of its exhaust reverberated violently as the two-seater sports car sped off. Forgotten in the blink of an eye, Kojou and the others watched them go with bewilderment.

"Why is...Asagi with a guy like...?"

Kojou seemed half beside himself. Rather than nervousness or unease, what swirled inside his mind was pure doubt. The same seemed to go for Yukina beside him.

As if to console the shaken Kojou, Nagisa smiled especially brightly at him. "Ch-cheer up, okay? Hey, Nagisa will definitely make chocolate for you this year, too, so..."

"Um, Kojou... She's my childhood friend, so like...sorry?"

Wide-eyed and showing compassion, Yaze put his hand on Kojou's shoulder, the latter standing rooted to the spot.

A girl with hair the color of steel ran down an unnatural-feeling corridor adorned with modern glass decor.

It was difficult to place the girl's age. On the surface, she appeared to be thirteen or fourteen. Her contoured face looked a little more adult than that, but if anything, that made the outgoing, innocent expression on it feel even odder still.

The girl wore only a thin green patient's gown for undergoing intensive tests. Beyond that, she wore not even a T-shirt, let alone a single pair of underwear. As the girl ran barefoot across the floor, the hem of the patient's gown ran up her legs, exposing her thighs right up to her hips.

"Glenda!"

Wearing a doctor's uniform, Shio Hikawa emerged from the back of the corridor, chasing the steel-haired girl down.

With a short haircut that was longer on the sides, she gave off an impression of a rather determined girl. Thanks to desperately chasing after the steel-haired girl—Glenda—her breathing was a bit heavy. She had picked up the bra and panties that Glenda had stripped off. The people coming and going in the corridor stood still, blinking hard at the bizarre scene unfolding before them.

"Wait! Hey, Glenda! Put your clothes on!"

"Yaaaaaa!"

As if to mock the pursuing Shio, Glenda swiftly ran down a flight of stairs.

Glenda wore a big smile, if not much else. Apparently, during the course of running away, she was having loads of fun, as if she were playing a game of tag. Suddenly, she lifted her head, throwing her arms wide as she let out a sound of delight. She'd noticed a new girl standing near the building's entrance.

Wearing the school uniform of a famous girl's school in Kansai, this schoolgirl gave off an elegant air.

She was just a bit shy of 160 centimeters in height. Her medium-bob hairstyle

made her appear very put together. The bangs that fell down the sides of her head were even adorned with ribbon-style hairpins. This was Yuiri Haba, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.

“Yuii!!”

“Huh?”

Hearing Shio call her name in a loud voice, Yuiri lifted her head in apparent surprise. The sight of Glenda sprinting full force at her made her go “Huuuh?!” as she prepared herself, still with no idea what was happening.

“Yuii—!!”

Glenda leaped at Yuiri’s chest as if attempting a full body tackle. “Oof!” went Yuiri, staggering as she found herself unable to resist the impact. Glenda brought her face to Yuiri’s neck, nuzzling her as if fawning like a little girl. She looked less like a dragon than a little dog excited that her master had come home.

“Yuii, hold Glenda right there, would you...?!”

“Sh-Shio? What’s going on?”

“She...ran out here without wearing any clothes...”

Fiercely out of breath, Shio wobbled as she finally caught up. Based on how Shio, a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, was totally exhausted, Yuiri could begin to imagine just how much of an ordeal it had been to chase after this girl.

“Hey, you! Glenda, don’t move. And get off of Yuiri!”

As Glenda stayed glued to Yuiri, Shio tried to dress her in her underwear. However, the dragon girl thrashed her body in defiance.

“Yaaa, pool! Let’s go, relax!”

Glenda earnestly pleaded to be let outside as she pointed to the scenery visible on the other side of the glass. Having experienced playing in a pool for the very first time the day before, she’d taken a liking to it and had kept going down the waterslides until the sun set. She’d no doubt trusted that she’d be able to go to the pool again that day, as if this was the natural course of events.

“So the tests are done already, then?”

“Somehow, yeah.” Shio nodded at Yui’s question.



Three days earlier, the girls had visited the small island dubbed Blue Elysium.

Blue Elysium, aka Blue Ely. Constructed off the coast of Itogami Island proper, it was a brand-new model of sub-float. To most people, it was known as a high-end resort, with hotels, pools, and facilities filled with all manner of attractions.

However, of course Yuiri and the others had not come to that island to goof off. As part of a Demon Sanctuary, Blue Elysium also had special facilities that did not exist on the mainland. Rare demon beasts from all over the world were raised, and biological research was conducted upon them, at a large-scale facility known as Demon Beast Park.

It was Yuiri and Shio's current mission to use the instruments and staff at that research facility to uncover the truth about Glenda, whose true nature remained shrouded in mystery. To casual observers, they may have looked like nothing more than Glenda's playmates, but part of their mission was to observe her and manage her physical condition, so it really couldn't be helped.

"All right. Let's go to the pool, then."

Yui made a strained smile as she stroked Glenda's hair. The annoyed stares of the research facility employees were getting on her nerves right around then anyway.

Glenda lifted her face, eyes sparkling.

"Pool!"

"But first, you're going to put on your clothes. We're going to buy some delicious chocolates, after all."

"Choco!"

Accepting a box of chocolates from Yuiri, Glenda immediately tore the paper wrapping off and dug in. Now that she had finally stopped resisting, Shio somehow managed to successfully dress her.

"Sorry, Yuiri. You're a lifesaver."

"Tee-hee, thank you for all your hard work. Let's move this to the changing room, shall we?"

“I suppose so. We need to get a swimsuit onto Glenda, after all...”

With her cheeks stuffed full of chocolate, Shio led her by the hand and walked in the direction of the changing room. Now that she’d accepted they were heading to the pool, Glenda was far better behaved.

“Yes, swimsuits. There are plenty on loan, so pick whichever you like, Shio,” Yuiri said.

Just as they were arriving at the changing room, Yuiri opened the tote bag she had been carrying and spread out the contents. As they would be staying at Blue Elysium for some time, she’d gone ahead and rented a whole bunch of swimsuits. Many had cutesy designs, meaning that lack of suitable candidates would not be an issue.

However, Shio shot these a scornful expression.

“I’m fine. There’s a rash guard in my supplies and all.”

“Huh?! You mustn’t. Chances to visit a high-class resort like this come once in a blue moon. If you wear a plain swimsuit like that, you’ll stand out even more!”

When Shio tried to take out a most unflattering piece of marine sportswear, Yuiri hastily tried to stop her.

“Er, but...”

Shio seemed angry as Yuiri’s fingers lifted one of the loaner swimsuits. It was an audacious string bikini with minimal skin coverage that didn’t seem suitable for anyone short of a gravure idol.

“—Wait, there’s no way I can wear a flashy swimsuit like that! Th-that’s embarrassing...!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You’re slender and stylish, Shio. This much should be normal for you.”

“We’re on duty, you know. I can’t carry spell scrolls for self-defense with this on!”

“It’s all right. You can move easier without resistance from fabric, after all. You could just put the spell scrolls down your cleavage...”

“If you really think that, you should wear this and hide them between your big breasts, Yuiri!”

Yui was smiling as if it was someone else’s problem as she pushed the string bikini onto Shio. Shio’s unexpected counterattack made Yuiri’s face twitch.

“Huh?! Me?! No way, no way, no way. My upper arms are too thick. And yesterday I ate too much when I was with Glenda, so I’ve got a little extra tummy pudge...”

“That just makes you cuter, doesn’t it? I’m sure Kojou Akatsuki would think so, too.”

“Th-this has nothing to do with Kojou!”

“Even though you bought expensive-looking chocolates for him?”

“Why do you know about that, Shio...?!”

Yui lamented, crying out “Waaah!” as she shook her blushing face.

“It—it’s not like that; I was thinking I could eat those together with Yukii...! So you’re wrong! And I mean, Shio, don’t you enjoy Kirasaka’s chocolates year in and year out?!”

“I do not! Kirasaka calls that her leftovers... Hey, this isn’t about me anyway!”

Finally, both Yui and Shio had become irritated during their heated war of words. Both had long forgotten what had sparked the argument in the first place. With the pair raising a ruckus in the cramped confines of the changing room, Glenda, the only rational person left, tugged on Yuiri’s school uniform.

“Yui! I put on the swimsuit! Pool...!”

The sight of Glenda as guileless as usual made Yui and Shio exchange a silent glance.

“...Let’s get changed ourselves, huh?”

“I suppose so. Ordinary swimsuits, for now...”

They nodded with a twinge of guilt, and both Yui and Shio put on suitable swimsuits they had picked. Yuiri’s was an orthodox swimsuit with frills. Shio chose a simple monotone bikini. Putting on jackets to counter sunburn, the girls

headed toward the pool.

3

The front gate of the pool was ten minutes from the demon-beast-related research facility via automated electric cart. Including pools designed to look like a great wave had crashed against a shore and waterslides that exceeded two hundred meters in length, the nine varieties of pools, featuring something for every taste, was Blue Elysium's greatest selling point.

Notwithstanding that Itogami Island was in the tropics, the February temperatures made it a little too cold to go swimming. Thanks to that, there were fewer guests than one might normally expect. Monopolizing a huge pool felt exhilarating. It was easy to understand why Glenda was so worked up.

"Did you learn anything about Glenda?" Yuiri asked quietly, watching the girl head off and leap into the pool after some warm-ups.

Shio, dipping her toe into the water to test its temperature, shook her head.

"Apparently, it'll be a good couple weeks before a detailed conclusion comes back. They don't have many dragon-cell samples to begin with, so individual variation is pretty high, and that makes analysis take longer. They did draft a summary of what they know here and now, though."

"These are Glenda's analysis results?"

Gazing at the screen of the tablet handed to her, Yuiri's expression stiffened. Upon it was data comparing the genetic information from cells taken from Glenda with those of other living creatures.

The knowledge of demons Yuiri possessed was all related to fighting them; she was ill versed on their biology. Despite that, even she could immediately tell that Glenda's analysis results were abnormal.

Her cells resembled neither humans nor other dragons. The estimated density of the genetic information was dozens of times greater than normal living creatures, if not more. Dragons included, no living creature existed among Demonkind that held genetic information within their cells to such an extent.

If there was a living creature that rivaled her results, it would probably be the cells of Wiseman's Blood—the God created via alchemy.

"Glenda is a new genus beyond any evolutionary tree ever known to have existed. Furthermore, there are traces of magical manipulation at a molecular level."

Shio spoke with a somewhat conflicted expression, prompting Yuiri to lift her face in surprise.

"You mean...just like a homunculus...?!"

"Yeah. Glenda is an artificial dragon made by...someone. That's if the analysis results are correct, mind you."

"Creating a dragon—you can do that?!" countered Yuiri, half beside herself.

"With humanity's current technology, no way. But with the scientific strength of the Devas... Not that I get why they'd want to a dragon in the first place, though..."

"Maybe...because they're cute...?"

"Well, that's...not impossible..."

Lounging poolside, Shio crossed her arms and began to mull over the issue with a pensive look on her face. While she did, Glenda rode a kickboard, going in circles within the flowing pool. It was a scene with no tension whatsoever.

"Treasure...maybe?" Shio hesitantly murmured.

"Eh?"

"Prince Aziz of the Fallen Dynasty said dragons guard treasure."

"But there wasn't any treasure in Kannawa Lake, was there?" Yuiri prodded, at a loss.

"Yeah. But if Glenda is a treasure herself, then...", Shio said nonchalantly. Of course, she probably didn't seriously believe it herself.

However, the words made Yuiri gasp, her eyes widening. "I see... Come to think of it, Major Azama of the Self-Defense Forces said something like that, I think. Like, 'Glenda is the protector of the legacy Cain left behind, the vessel for

the God's information' and stuff..."

"The God's...information...?"

"No way," said Shio, about to dismiss the notion with a laugh, when suddenly, her expression hardened. Reaching her hand toward the instrument case at her side, she pulled out the silver recurve bow folded and holstered within.

Yui did likewise, opening her instrument case and smoothly drawing out a long, silver sword.

The barrier Yui and Shio had deployed around the pool beforehand had alerted them to the presence of an intruder: a terrifyingly powerful Demon, at that.

"Shio!"

"I know! What's with this ridiculous demonic energy...?!"

"Glenda, get over here! Quickly!"

"Dah?"

Perhaps noticing Yui's and Shio's anxiety, Glenda immediately approached the side of the pool.

A moment later, under the afternoon sunrays pouring down upon them, a pitch-black mist coalesced.

"...!"

Nocking a metallic curse arrow to her recurve bow, Shio gasped in abject shock.

The mist then increased in density, changing into a human form.

Standing there was a tall, slender man with a very dark appearance. He wore a well-tailored, old-fashioned coat, and his hair was so black that it seemed woven from the very darkness of night. His face was youthful and refined, but the quiet dignity shrouding his entire body produced a bottomless sense of implicit force. Even from a distance, they could clearly sense that this was a supernatural being incompatible with humankind.

This was an Old Guard vampire that had lived for many years. Furthermore,

he was a being of limitless danger close to that of a primogenitor.

“Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency, are you not...?”

The man spoke coldly, gazing indifferently at Yuiri and Shio, who put up their guard.

Yuri remained silent as her shoulders trembled. Fear kept her from raising her voice. Yuri, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, was overwhelmed by the man’s presence. Surely the same went for Shio.

The black-haired man did not give off the impression of someone crude or violent. If anything, his manner was calm and intellectual. In spite of this, Yuri felt fear, for who could be calm in the face of a walking calamity.

“I hereby demand that you hand over the Dragon of the Swamp.”

Speaking those words, the man indicated the steel-haired girl with his eyes, causing Glenda to freeze in fear.

Yuri shifted to shield Glenda, turning her silver sword toward the man. “Who are you? And what do you want with Glenda?” she asked as she glared at the dark-haired man.

Surprisingly, the man’s expression did not change. Yuri’s blatant wariness didn’t seem to have any effect on him, and he looked plainly at the girls as he replied.

“My name is Velesh Aradahl, of the bloodline of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.”

“Velesh...Aradahl...?”

“His Excellency Aradahl, the Duke of Severin?!”

Yuri and Shio spoke in hushed voices as they gawked. Duke of Severin of the Warlord’s Empire, Velesh Aradahl—of course they knew his name.

After all, he was the chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire—the vampire seen as the de facto second most powerful man therein, next to the primogenitor himself. He was a major player in both the worlds of politics and finance, with influence on a global scale.

He was also well-known as a warrior, having left incredible exploits on battlefields of times past. It was said that even Dimitrie Vattler paid Aradah! appropriate respect. Such a legendary vampire stood before Yuiri and Shio at that very moment.

“The Holy Ground Treaty Organization has determined that the Dragon of the Swamp poses a grave threat.” Heedless of the pair’s bewilderment, Aradah! one-sidedly made his case. “I shall now retrieve her, accordingly. Your cooperation would be most appreciated.”

“The Holy Ground Treaty Organization...declared Glenda a threat...?”

Shio’s voice quivered as she parroted the words back. The Holy Ground Treaty Organization was an international agency administered by the Holy Ground Treaty allied nations, which included the Dominions. It held the right to take countermeasures against grave sorcerous menaces and possessed military strength for this purpose.

But naturally, the Holy Ground Treaty Organization only dealt with large-scale sorcerous crimes on a grand international scale. She couldn’t just blithely believe that Glenda’s existence posed such a risk.

“If you do leave with Glenda, what do you intend to do with her?” Yuiri asked.

As if he had anticipated that very question, the black-haired vampire calmly replied, “The Japanese government has failed to neutralize the Dragon of the Swamp. Accordingly, we shall do so in its stead.”

“Neutralize...? You can’t mean...,” murmured Yuiri, fear apparent in her voice.

“Seal her, dismantle her. Either way, it has nothing to do with the two of you.”

“Now that you’ve said that, there’s no way we’re handing her over!” replied Shio, half shouting.

“Is that so? How unfortunate.”

Aradah!’s expression didn’t waver in the slightest. He simply waved his left hand.

In the next moment, a sword appeared at his side with a blade that reached

seven, perhaps eight meters in length. The giant, translucent blade materialized from dense demonic energy. This was a vampiric Beast Vassal—an Intelligent Weapon.

“Glenda, get back—!”

Yui called sharply toward the steel-haired girl as she leaped forward.

The giant blade Aradahl had summoned flew like a bullet, rending the air in its wake. The Intelligent Weapon’s target was Glenda. Its purpose was to rip right through Yui’s shielding body to reach Glenda behind her.

“Rosen Chevalier Plus, Boot Up—!!”

Yui slammed her long sword into Aradahl’s Beast Vassal.

No normal weapon could fend off a Beast Vassal, a mass of destructive demonic energy. However, Yui’s Rosen Chevalier Plus was the exception to the rule. The pseudo-spatial severing created in the wake of Yui’s attack formed an absolutely invincible defensive wall that even the Beast Vassal’s attack could not slice apart.

“Request ID confirmation! Freikugel Plus Proto Three, Unlock!”

“Confirmed—Freikugel Plus, Active.”

At the same time Yui was stopping Aradahl’s attack, Shio was releasing the safety on her recurve bow. Shio’s Freikugel Plus was the completed area-suppression weapon that was the pride of the Lion King Agency. Producing high-density spell chants via whistling arrows, it could create large-scale ritual spell artillery on a scale beyond human limitations. Its might was said to rival even that of vampiric Beast Vassals.

“I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee!”

So powerful that its use was strictly limited, it was this Freikugel Plus’s ritual spell artillery that Shio was releasing from all limitations. She had judged that there was no other way to defeat Aradahl. Surely no one could blame Shio for that snap decision.

But.

“Shio, don’t—!”

Yui screamed at Shio. The power of a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency allowed Yui to peer an instant into the future. However, Yui was not in time to stop her. Shio had already launched her artillery attack...

“Let there be light—!”

“Gouge, Invidia.”

The whistling arrow unleashed by Freikugel Plus drew an immense magic circle in the air, creating ritual spell artillery in the form of a beam of light. It was a great sword the color of choking darkness that blocked that artillery attack. Aradahl had summoned a new Intelligent Weapon.

The frontal clash between immense ritual energy and demonic energy spanned but a single second.

Aradahl’s Beast Vassal sliced Shio’s artillery attack apart. With pressure exceeding the ritual energy’s critical limits, it was blown away, becoming a shock wave as it dissipated. Violently raging air ravaged the poolside concrete, blowing away every parasol and bench around them.

Yui deployed a pseudo-spatial severing defensive wall, but even Rosen Chevalier Plus’s abilities could not fend off a shock wave that had turned into a waterspout.

Batted around by violent winds on all sides, Yui and Shio were sent flying, at the complete mercy of the magic. Their insides were shaken to the point that they could not breathe. Every bone in their bodies cried out. They had only managed to remain conscious from the jolt of hitting the water.

“Yui! Shio!”

With Yui and Shio in danger of drowning, Glenda held them above the water’s surface as best she could. Glenda, who had already been in the water, got off lightly compared to them.

Yui and Shio were severely injured. They’d taken the full impact of the explosion, and every joint in their bodies was screaming in agony. Contusions and sprains had completely wrecked their bodies with far too many abrasions from the concrete fragments to count.

For his part, Aradahl was largely unharmed. Amid the still-raging violent winds, the only thing astir was his dark hair. Yuiri and Shio no longer had the strength to protect Glenda from his attacks.

“Glenda...run...,” muttered Shio with a pained cough.

Glenda’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Shio... Yuiri...”

“Run to Itogami Island. Kojou and Yukii will help you...okay?”

“Uu...” Staring at Yuiri and Shio, their bodies mangled, Glenda shook her head in reluctance.

“Go, Glenda!” Yuiri spoke the words in a strong tone, as if she was scolding Glenda.

“...Dah!”

Even though Glenda’s eyes were teary, she nodded deeply, her mind apparently made up.

From the back of her swimsuit, large, steel-colored wings spread forth. Enveloped by the radiance of magic, Glenda’s body was changing into its enormous dragon form. With movements so elegant, reminiscent of a beautiful swan, she glided across the surface of the water and leaped into the air. It was some eighteen kilometers between Blue Elysium and Itogami Island. On her own, Glenda would surely reach it.

“—Dance, Ghoul!”

Aradahl summoned a new Beast Vassal, intent on chasing Glenda down. As Glenda danced in the sky, the giant sword scattered flames all around as it shot out toward her. The sentient great sword accelerated as if it were a cannonball, attacking the silver-colored dragon from behind like a hungry shark.

Glenda, defenseless just after lifting off, had no chance to evade it. The pitch-black blade ripped through the air with a great roar, surely about to mercilessly impale the dragon through the back—

As Yuiri and Shio drew in their breaths, an amber-colored net deployed in the sky, protecting Glenda. It was a net made of incandescent magma.

Tracing a geometric shape reminiscent of a spiderweb, the thread held

Aradah!’s Beast Vassal in place.

“Nephila Ignis—”

Poolside, with violent winds still raging, a gentle voice echoed forth.

Shrouded in a silver mist, a short, handsome, androgynous youth emerged. There was a huge, gleaming, amber-colored spider at his feet. The youth controlled the incandescent spider that had caught Aradah!’s great sword and saved Glenda.

“So you’ve come, Kira Lebedev—”

Aradah! called out the small-statured person’s name. He was Kira Lebedev, Count of Voltislava. Like Aradah!, he was an aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire. And yet, that very Kira had impeded Aradah!’s attack, lending a hand to aid Glenda in her escape.

“Did Vattler put you up to this? Damn him, what does he intend to use the Dragon of the Swamp for?”

“I believe you are well acquainted with that lord’s personality, are you not, Your Excellency Aradah!?”

Kira spoke those words gently while smiling. Aradah! clicked his tongue, looking disgruntled.

“Then that is all the more reason I cannot allow the Dragon of the Swamp to escape—Ghoula!”

Aradah!’s Beast Vassal rotated in midair, slashing the incandescent spiderweb apart. The flaming great sword proceeded to divide into countless short swords. As Kira stood on the ground, these poured down onto him from overhead, impaling his body from all directions.

However, even with his entire body impaled by the Beast Vassal, Kira’s peaceful smile did not falter.

His entire body suddenly lost its shape, transforming into what seemed like shadowy ooze. Then, the ooze proceeded to flow into the pool’s drainage grate.

“Deionika Nox... A dummy mirror image!”

Brusquely clicking his tongue once more, Aradahl looked up at the sky above the sea.

During the time Kira had held Aradahl's attention, Glenda in her dragon form had already flown far over the ocean. Through manipulation of a clone created by a Beast Vassal rather than direct combat, Kira had successfully slowed Aradahl down.

"Glenda... I'm so glad..."

Once she saw that the dragon girl was safe, Shio smiled weakly. Then, as if her marionette strings had been cut, she fainted, floating on the water's surface, depleted of strength.

With Shio in that state, Yuiri kept hold of her as she somehow managed to reach the side of the pool. However, she no longer had the strength to pull their bodies to the surface.

"Yukii...sorry to...drag you into this..."

Recalling the sight of her junior on Itogami Island, Yuiri made a tiny apology within her heart. By sending Glenda to Itogami Island, Yuiri was involving Yukina in the fight against Aradahl.

This she did, knowing full well that Yukina's target for observation was a vampire as dangerous as Aradahl, or perhaps more—

"Ko...jou..."

Murmuring the boy's name, Yuiri feebly closed her eyes.

Then, bathed in the sunlight reflecting off the surface of the water, her consciousness sank to the bottom of somewhere cold and dark.

4

Humming a tune that was not quite the right melody, Mimori Akatsuki stepped down the stairs.

She was in the deep subterranean section of Magna Ataraxia Research Inc.'s Itogami Island laboratory—a place known as the Coffin Room for short. The

devices were all brand-new, but the strict isolation measures surrounding it left it an oddly cold place.

Even among the elite research staff, few ever visited the place.

The entry limitations were quite strict, but no one wanted to be close to it in the first place.

The cause was simple. It was fear.

They were afraid of the room.

The eyewitnesses to spiritual and other bizarre phenomena were beyond counting. As a matter of fact, the number of researchers who had killed themselves or retired from mental illness was not small. Even the people who didn't believe in such unscientific phenomena as "curses" wanted to keep their distance when they heard the sheer frequency with which measuring equipment broke down or gave false readings.

Hard to blame them, thought Mimori.

After all, sleeping within the room was the true Fourth Primogenitor, said to be calamity incarnate—for these were the remains of Root Avrora.

"Mm-hmmm—"

Mimori Akatsuki's humming echoed through the lab devoid of another living presence.

Placed in the center of the room was a cube of ice around three meters thick.

A girl was sleeping within—a girl with rainbow-colored hair that resembled billowing flames.

A silver glow emanated from the girl's chest as she lay on her side within the block of ice, and a large object protruded from her chest; it was a metallic stake, which had impaled her heart.

No power had been able to coax the block of ice enveloping the girl to melt. Accordingly, the silver stake had never been removed from her chest. This block of ice was her coffin. Thus, the room had been dubbed the Coffin Room.

"Oh my?"

However, just as she reached the bottom of the stairs, Mimori Akatsuki halted.

She had realized there was already a visitor in the purportedly unoccupied room.

It was a small girl. She was wearing a *yukata* with a vibrant floral pattern. On her feet, she wore split-toe socks and glossy-black wooden clogs. An air of elegance and class hovered around her.

When she turned around, the girl's eyes glimmered in the darkness like blue flames.

Her tied-up hair was a faintly golden color; yet, like a rainbow, it changed color depending on the angle of the light.

Her appearance strongly resembled that of the naked girl resting within the ice—nay, the girls looked identical.

She had the same face as the one who slept within the coffin: the girl known as Aurora, the twelfth Kaleid Blood.

“My, my, we have an unexpected guest.”

However, Mimori showed no sign of being shaken or put off. In fact, her tone was cheerful, her expression welcoming the unknown intruder.

Mimori's reaction made the girl in the *yukata* smile as well. Her beautiful eyebrows rose in apparent praise.

“Thou gazeth directly at me, yet, your heart is not astir. 'Tis most unexpected.”

“That's because I suspected it was right about time that someone came to deliver a warning. Well, naturally I didn't expect it would be you delivering it in person.”

Mimori smiled as her feet remained still. There were about ten meters between her and the girl in the *yukata*.

There was an emergency-warning button on the wall close to Mimori. If she touched it, heavily armored security personnel would surely bear down upon them in under three minutes. However, Mimori did not sound it, for she knew it

would be futile to do so.

Even with every security guard in the lab gathered together, they could do nothing to this girl. After all, she was one of the so-called World's Mightiest Vampires.

"...So do you mind my asking which number you are?"

"I art Hektos...the sixth Kaleid Blood."

In contrast to her haughty tone, the girl in the *yukata*'s smile appeared desolate. With the seal on Hektos released, she was the only one of the Numbered left with a complete seal. Perhaps that fact had instilled a sense of mortality within her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Hektos. Would you like some ice cream?"

Mimori fished out a fresh ice cream bar from the compact cooler she carried on her hip. Regarding the frozen treat offered to her with a hint of suspicion, the girl who called herself Hektos winced.

"Thou tempteth me with an offering? 'Tis futile, mother of Kojou Akatsuki. I am an envoy of the end of all things."

"Yeah, about that—could you give me a little more time?"

Mimori teasingly narrowed her eyes. Hektos shook her head with a neutral expression, gazing at the other girl resting on her side within the ice.

"...Thou desirest to revive my kin?"

"I want to clone her, to be exact," Mimori said gently. "If we can create a clone of the previous Fourth Primogenitor, the soul of the twelfth Kaleid Blood, Aurora Florestina, can be transferred into it, yes? Along with the Beast Vassal possessing her."

"And in so doing, save thy daughter?"

"It would save the girl and my daughter both. Am I wrong?" Despite her playful smile, Mimori was completely serious.

Long ago, artificial vampires, the girls known as the Kaleid Bloods, were created in order to seal away the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

There had been twelve of them. However, eleven had already been lost, leaving the sixth Kaleid Blood as the sole survivor. Playing the role of the seals, it was the girls' destiny to disappear as the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were released.

The one exception, the only not to have disappeared, was Avrora, the Twelfth—the girl who had left behind the body sleeping within the ice.

Even at that very moment, the seal on her Beast Vassal had not been completely released. After all, the girl had been *killed* before the seal could be removed. The silver stake left in her chest was the proof.

To this day, with her body slain, Avrora's soul slept within Mimori's daughter, Nagisa Akatsuki, who had wished for that very thing.

However, even now, Avrora's soul, fused with a Beast Vassal, was a great strain on Nagisa's body. It was painfully obvious that one day, when the burden became too much for Nagisa to bear, she would die.

Hence, Mimori had attempted to create a new body in which to insert Avrora's soul.

"Thou art not mistaken—," Hektos murmured. "However, I shall not grant thy desire. It is her will that this body disappear."

"I suppose it is... Well, allow me to thank you anyway. I mean, if we ended up resurrecting Root Avrora at a time like this, we'd be in quite a pickle."

Mimori gave a vague smile and shook her head. Even with MAR Inc.'s sorcerous technology, creating a new Kaleid Blood—an artificial vampire—was exceptionally difficult, so Mimori's objective had gone unfulfilled.

The reason was that the Twelfth, Avrora herself, desired that her own body disappear completely.

Wrought by the gods, the operating system for the Fourth Primogenitor—the Accursed Soul dubbed Root—had taken over her own body. Therefore, to destroy it, she had *chosen to be killed*.

It was Avrora herself who had encased her corpse in a coffin of ice so that the Accursed Soul could never be revived anew. The coffin created by the power of

a Beast Vassal completely quarantined Avrora's body from the outside; Mimori and her fellow researchers had yet to obtain a single cell sample from her. All of this was the will of the Twelfth, Avrora. She intended to vanish from the world without *a single speck of dust* remaining of her.

That was surely why Hektos had come to visit the lab.

She, the sixth Kaleid Blood, had come to fulfill the dying wish of her kin, Avrora.

"But... But even so... I want to save both of those girls. Please...", Mimori pleaded quietly and earnestly, staring at the *yukata*-clad girl.

Hektos slowly shook her head. She touched the block of ice surrounding the Twelfth.

The coffin of ice wrought by the power of a Beast Vassal could not be broken.

However, if another Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor desired its destruction—

"Forgive me. For that this be destroyed is both her desire and mine—"

Before Hektos finished speaking, the coffin of ice began glowing.

Without a sound, the block of ice shattered, turning into countless transparent fragments.

The vast demonic energy resting in each and every one of those fragments unleashed an overwhelming tranquility from within.

Finally, the remains the girl had left behind were wreathed in flame, scattered as particles of light, and vanished.

"Forgive me..."

With that, the Sixth departed. Wordlessly, Mimori watched her go.

In the end, the only thing left on the lab room's floor was a slender, silver-colored stake.

The mass of metal had lost its radiance. Mimori stared at it for a long time.

The next morning, on February 13...

Attending school earlier than usual, Kojou Akatsuki arrived in his classroom and surveyed the area with bloodshot eyes. It was then that the class representative, Rin Tsukishima, casually addressed him.

“Good morning, Akatsuki. You’re quite early today, aren’t you?”

Rin’s voice was as serene as usual, but her pupils visibly glimmered with curiosity. However, Kojou did not notice.

“Ah, morning, Tsukishima.”

“If you’re looking for Asagi, she hasn’t arrived yet,” Rin said, amused by Kojou’s head-in-the-clouds reply.

Kojou stiffened in surprise. Apparently, it was obvious to Rin that he was trying to find his friend.

“Well, I suppose it’s only natural for boys to be on edge around this time of year.”

Giggling and smiling, Rin gave a knowing nod. For a second, Kojou blinked, not comprehending what had just been said to him.

“Eh? Ah, what I want with her has nothing to do with that...”

“Oh, really...?”

Rin narrowed her eyes in even greater amusement. Apparently, she’d mistaken Valentine’s Day as the reason for Kojou’s nervousness. *How should I clear this misunderstanding up?* Kojou searched his thoughts, when suddenly, a girl with an extravagant hairstyle entered the classroom—Asagi Aiba.

“Asagi!”

Putting the issue of Rin on the back burner for the time being, Kojou raced toward her. Asagi, defenseless as she let out a yawn, blinked in surprise at Kojou’s urgency.

“K-Kojou? What’s with that desperate look on your face?”

“You got a sec? I need to talk to you.”

Kojou was looking directly into Asagi’s eyes with a rare seriousness. Asagi

warily narrowed her brows.

“Talk—you mean, now? I’m on day duty today, so I’m preparing for the next class—”

“It won’t take long. You met with someone yesterday afternoon, right?”

“Yesterday afternoon?”

What do you mean? said Asagi’s facial expression as she touched a finger to her temple, staring off into space. Then, as if she just remembered something, she gasped, her expression stiffening.

However, Asagi’s visible distress lasted but an instant, not even spanning a tenth of a second of time. She immediately shook her head with an innocent expression.

“Nah, I didn’t meet with anyone. I was watching a drama series on the net.”

“I spotted you at the plaza in front of Thetis Mall.”

“What are you talking about? You must have me mixed up with someone else.”

Asagi tilted her head, mystified, turning a suspicious gaze toward Kojou instead. Her explanation was so bold that Kojou was nearly on the verge of swallowing it.

“—Mixed up, my ass!! What are you trying to hide?!”

“Whaaat? Hide—what would I be trying to hide from you?!”

“Why were you there together with that Jagan guy—?”

“Knock it off! I told you I don’t know anything!”

As Kojou leaned forward and got more in her face, Asagi slammed the desk with a *bam*. She was furious. Her intensity made Kojou wince. He could feel the inquisitive gazes of his classmates boring holes in his back.

“Asagi’s cheating on him...” “Jagan? Wait, does that mean...?” “The Warlord Empire’s...” “Come to think of it, he looked kinda cool...” Such whispers began circulating all over the classroom.

Thanks to Kojou’s clumsy slipup, the name Jagan was now hot on their lips.

Due to very particular circumstances, Tobias Jagan, a vampire of the Warlord's Empire, had attended school at Saikai Academy for a short span of about two weeks. A girl who fell in love with a foreign vampire above her station, confronted by her former boyfriend—it was a truly gripping scandal.

“Wait, Asagi! I'm not done talking to you, dammit—!”

“About what?! I don't know anything, and even if I did, it's none of your business!”

When Kojou's hand reached out to try to keep her from leaving, Asagi violently swatted it aside. She then turned her back to Kojou and marched out of the classroom.

“Asagi? Where are you going?” Rin asked calmly.

Asagi glanced back for a single second before exiting the classroom. “The staff room! I need to get some printouts for homework!”

“Like I said, hold on a sec—”

As Asagi left to make her escape, Kojou headed out into the corridor to run after her. However, Rin put a stop to that, firmly pinning his arms behind his back.

“Hold it, Akatsuki! Calm down!”

“Let me go, Tsukishima!”

“Now, now. Hold your horses. At times like this, it's best to put a little distance between the two of you and cool off, yes? I understand why you're burning with jealousy, but I'll speak with Asagi, okay?”

“Huh? Jealousy?”

Rin's assertion made Kojou's cheek twitch as he unwittingly came to a halt. He realized far too late that his own actions were giving rise to a weird misunderstanding.

“You're wrong. This isn't an issue of jealousy... Not at all!”

Kojou's problem with Asagi's actions was that Tobias Jagan was involved.

Jagan was no ordinary vampire. He was a subordinate of Dimitrie Vattler, the

combat maniac who'd exposed Itogami Island to danger a number of times over. Kojou couldn't help but worry about Asagi coming into contact with such a dangerous individual.

However, Rin let out an eerily mature-sounding sigh.

"Now, just a minute. If you're going to make me spell it out, I believe you shoulder much of the blame for this, Akatsuki. You're always ignoring Asagi while spending all your time with your little sister's middle school friend, so it's only natural that..."

"What the heck are you talkin' about?!"

"I'm saying, I think it is a little unfair of you to pin all the blame on Asagi."

"I'm not blaming her at all. Like I said, I just want her to hear me out—"

Wriggling free from Rin's grip, Kojou gave her a rapid-fire retort. As he did, he heard an oddly haughty voice from behind.

"You are making quite a scene, Kojou Akatsuki. What are you whining about in the corridor just before class?"

"Natsuki...?"

Kojou gasped and turned around. Standing there was a baby-faced teacher, not even reaching 140 centimeters in height. This was Natsuki Minamiya, Kojou and his classmates' homeroom teacher.

Hearing her pupil address her by her first name, Natsuki glared in disdain. However, Kojou ignored that, chasing her down to a corner of the corridor.

"Natsuki, your timing couldn't be better. Where's Jagan?"

"Jagan? Tobias Jagan of the Warlord's Empire?"

Perhaps awed by Kojou's intensity, Natsuki simply prodded for detail. Kojou gave a big nod.

"The Gigafloat Management Corporation keeps tabs on his whereabouts, right? So tell me!"

"I wouldn't know. And even if I did, I would not be telling an outsider like you, now would I? If you really want to know, you should just ask Asagi to hack the

Corporation's surveillance data."

"If I could do that, this would be simple..."

Kojou clutched his head as he reeled. Asagi was the cause of Kojou searching for Jagan to begin with. For a time, Natsuki stared gloomily at the sight of Kojou writhing in anguish before exhaling in visible exasperation.

"First of all, what business do you have with that man, Kojou Akatsuki?"

"Asagi met with him yesterday! And now she's being hush-hush about it!"

"...Male jealousy. How trite."

"It's not that, dammit! Are you okay with this?! He's a vampire, you know?!"

"Aren't you something quite similar?"

Kojou groaned, Natsuki's frighteningly blunt assertion leaving him at a loss for words. To an objective observer, Kojou, possessor of the stupidly grandiose title of World's Mightiest Vampire, was a more dangerous and troublesome being than Jagan. It wasn't as if Kojou himself was ignorant of this, either.

Unable to say anything in reply, Natsuki coldly stared at him with visible scorn.

"This is a Demon Sanctuary, after all. You are free to love anyone you wish, be it an aristocrat of the Warlord's Empire or some stray primogenitor."

"Even if it's one of Vattler's flunkies?"

"He is no subordinate, but rather, an ally and an equal. Not that I think a major player like him would put up with a mewling brat like Asagi."

"Um... Calling her a brat is kinda..."

You're not one to talk, thought Kojou, beside himself. Due to certain circumstances, Natsuki's growth had stopped at a point where her external appearance was that of an eleven-or twelve-year-old. To the naked eye, she was far more of a child than Asagi.

"Of course, if he used a Charm power to force Asagi to obey him, that would be a crime. Failing that, there is no issue. You shouldn't be so broken up over a girl being stolen from you in the first place."

“Is that a line that a teacher should be saying?!”

Natsuki’s cold dismissal made him sigh in despair. Nor was there was any sign of Asagi returning from the staff room.

“Aww, crap... It’s just one thing after another...”

As the tepid gazes of his classmates washed over him, Kojou went to go sit in his own seat.

Along the way, he caught sight of Motoki Yaze standing by the windowsill. Yaze, who normally would be first in line to get Kojou to cool down, was oddly quiet that day. He was staring out the window, showing no sign of having noticed the commotion Kojou had created.

“...Yaze? ...You good?”

Yaze, finally taking note of Kojou’s existence, went “Yeah,” a very vague reply. He was staring squarely at the roof of the middle school on the other side of the campus.

“Er... I was just thinking: Did our school have a statue like that?”

“Statue?”

Shifting his gaze in the direction Yaze was pointing, Kojou dubiously narrowed his eyes. Certainly, there was an unfamiliar object standing statuesque upon the roof where entry was supposedly prohibited.

It looked like a huge living creature, covered in steel-colored scales. Its total length was several dozen meters. Its wings were folded in, and it had a long tail, making it resemble some kind of enormous sculpture of a demon beast.

“Geh...?!!”

Observing this, Kojou suddenly uttered a noise as blood drained from his face, for he had witnessed the sight of this demon beast before. It was a dragon with beautiful steel-colored scales—Glenda.

“Sorry, Yaze. I just remembered, there’s something I have to do and it definitely can’t wait! I’m leaving the rest to you!”

“Ah? Hey, class is about to—”

“Make up some kind of reasonable excuse, please!”

Kojou made that desperate plea as he rushed out of the classroom. He didn’t know why Glenda was sleeping on the Saikai Academy campus roof. Nonetheless, it was obvious that some kind of problem had arisen.

Fortunately, only a few students had noticed Glenda’s presence at that point. Even if they had noticed, they’d probably mistaken her for a simple ornament, just as Yaze had. However, he didn’t think such a precarious situation could be maintained for long. Even students in a Demon Sanctuary would inevitably fall into a panic once they realized a dragon had suddenly appeared on school grounds.

Before that happened, he had to pick up Glenda and get her out of the school somehow—

“Kojou.”

“Uh?”

As Kojou nervously broke into a run, oddly, he heard Yaze’s voice loud and clear.

When Kojou came to a surprised halt, Yaze was staring at him, issuing his warning with a sober look. Yaze, one usually so composed, looked like he had his back to the wall.

“Hurry. There’s no time.”

“R-right.”

Bewildered by Yaze’s cryptic words, Kojou broke into a run once more.

Seeing this for himself, Yaze shifted his gaze outside the window again. Staring beyond the water’s horizon, a place that surely could not be seen with the naked eye, he bit his lip without a word.

6

Racing up the emergency stairs at the back of the campus, Kojou arrived on the school rooftop. It was a bleak concrete space with a metal fence around it.

A familiar, immature dragon rested in the space between neatly arranged rows of solar panels.

“Glenda!”

Circling to the dragon’s front, Kojou called out the girl’s name.

Perhaps his voice reached her. The dragon’s eyelids twitched.

From what he could confirm visually, there were no wounds that stood out on her body. She seemed to be sleeping out of fatigue from prolonged flight. According to the information he heard from Sayaka the other day, Glenda was supposed to be staying at Blue Elysium’s Demon Beast Park. Kojou had absolutely no idea why, in spite of that, she had apparently flown all the way to Itogami Island.

“Dah...”

The steel-colored dragon made a sound in her throat. The cute voice clashed with her appearance. Her large eyes opened wide, beholding the sight of Kojou within them. Her huge head slowly rose, and suddenly a faint light emanated from her enormous, steel-colored body.

“G...Glenda?”

As Kojou stared in bewilderment, Glenda’s body began to shrink right in front of him. At some point, her wings had vanished from sight, and her tail vanished as he watched. Her beautiful mane transformed into long, steel-colored hair. In place of four, stout limbs emerged the delicate arms and legs of a girl.

“Hey, you! If you...turn back to human in a place like this...!”

Kojou hastily averted his eyes as Glenda changed into her human form. Given the enormous size difference, there was really no way to prevent this, but right after transforming, Glenda was, of course, completely naked. Furthermore, this was on school grounds in broad daylight. Together with a naked girl on a rooftop with no one else around—if anyone else witnessed this situation, Kojou’s life would be over.

“O-okay... For starters, let’s put something on you...”

Kojou, knowing full well it was not a real solution to the problem, stripped his

own parka off and tried to put it on Glenda. But having finished her transformation, Glenda was sitting flat on the roof, not moving a muscle.

Then, as she looked up at Kojou without a word, tears began to spill from her eyes. This time, Kojou's mouth hung open in confusion.

"Kojou..."

Glenda was sobbing and sniffing as she let out a frail voice.

"Hey... Glenda? Did something happen? Are you in pain anywhere?"

Thrown for a loop, Kojou earnestly attempted to soothe the girl. And as he did so, Glenda clung to him, still completely naked.

"Kojou... Kojou...!"

"Wait a... Wait, Glenda. At least get some clothes o—"

"Yui... Shio... At the pool... They told me...to run..."

"...Run...? What happened to Yui and Shio? Did someone attack you?"

Kojou quietly sobered as he looked at Glenda. Now that he thought about it, there were two Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency assigned as Glenda's bodyguards and caretakers. In spite of this, Glenda had been forced to flee all the way to Itogami Island all by herself. It had clearly been an emergency.

"Uu..."

However, all that came out of Glenda were sobs and tears; she was too hysterical for words. *What the hell happened?* Kojou sighed, lifting his face to the sky—

"?!"

He caught a black silhouette over the sea in the corner of his vision. An enormous birdlike object was gliding just above the water's surface. The midsection had a large swell to it. This was a seaplane unfamiliar to him—a flying boat.

It was heading in Kojou and Glenda's direction, gradually closing the distance.

The craft was far larger than his initial impression. The roar from the chorus of four turboprop engines prickled Kojou's and Glenda's skin.

When Glenda noticed its presence, her shoulders quivered. Her silver hair seemed to stand up. She growled with naked enmity.

“What is that thing...? Don’t tell me that’s...?!”

Kojou’s expression froze over in shock. The flying boat had already arrived in Itogami Island airspace, yet, it was maintaining full speed. However, its height above the ground was thirty meters at most. It wasn’t any higher off the ground than a ten-story building.

The sheer size of the craft made the resulting scene even more bizarre. The flying boat’s course was taking it over their heads, but it was kicking up an incredible cloud of dust along the surface of the ground, with ornamental trees and road signs along the streets being tossed around by the wind.

The craft was advancing in the direction of Saikai Academy—toward Kojou and Glenda. The flying boat’s speed did not drop. There was no sign of it gaining altitude. The silver-colored craft’s net weight was probably in the realm of forty metric tons. Its speed was hundreds of kilometers per hour as it headed straight for the Saikai Academy school grounds.

“It’s just charging straight in—?!”

Kojou instantly stood up, poising himself to summon a Beast Vassal. However, the other party’s flight path was in the airspace above an urban area. Even if he shot the flying ship down with a Beast Vassal, damage to buildings and people would be unavoidable.

“Glenda, get down!”

“Dah...?!”

Kojou clutched Glenda in his arms, rolling on the spot. By a scant several meters, the flying boat barely cleared the top of the campus as it sailed over Kojou’s and Glenda’s heads.

Screams went up all over the campus. A shock wave caused the campus’s glass windows to shudder and sent several solar panels flying. Glenda’s hair flapped wildly as the onslaught of gale-force winds left Kojou unable to breathe properly.

“Damn... What the hell’s with that flying boat?! This is totally against flight regulations...!”

Spitting out sand that had gotten into his mouth, Kojou sluggishly sat up. The flying boat that had harmlessly passed over Saikai Academy was now rapidly gaining altitude as it sailed off up into the sky.

“The hell was that all about?” Kojou vented in an annoyed, suspicious tone. Fear consumed Glenda from within Kojou’s embrace.

“Kojou!”

Glenda was staring fearfully at a water tank behind Kojou. Realizing that a person was standing on it, Kojou audibly drew in his breath.

His face was unfamiliar to Kojou. He was a foreigner with long black hair. The sleeves of his old-fashioned coat were flapping in the wind as the man looked down at Kojou and Glenda.

Kojou didn’t even have to think about where the man had come from. He’d been aboard the flying boat that had just appeared. The craft had no doubt passed through the airspace above the school so the man could drop down from it.

“A human—you are not. So you are a vampire as well, boy?” the dark-haired man addressed Kojou.

His calm tone was disconnected from any sense of coercion. However, Kojou felt a freezing chill nonetheless. His instincts as a living creature extolled him that the other party before his eyes was a dangerous being indeed.

“Who are you? Did you attack Yui and Shio?”

“Yui...?”

Kojou’s question prompted the man to raise an eyebrow, going “Ahhh” as he seemed to remember something.

“I see you are an acquaintance of those girls. Then, I shall return these to you —”

Opening a magical gate out of thin air, the man drew two things out of it. Without fanfare, he tossed them at Kojou’s feet: a silver long sword and a bow

—weapons that Kojou remembered seeing before.

“These are Yuiri’s and Shio’s...!”

Adding Glenda’s testimony to the weapons in the man’s possession, it was all too clear what had transpired. The man had launched a sudden attack on Glenda and company, robbing Yuiri and Shio of their weapons.

“Exactly...what did you do to Yuiri and Shio?”

“They got in the way of my objective, so I eliminated them. That is all.”

“...Objective?”

“To dispose of the Dragon of the Swamp.”

“So that’s what this is...”

Kojou grinded his teeth. The man had come to Saikai Academy in pursuit of Glenda, who Yuiri and Shio had managed to let escape, this time, to finish the job—

“Hand the Dragon of the Swamp over to me, boy. If you do not, you shall meet the same fate as those two girls.”

“Don’t mess with me!”

Before the man finished speaking, Kojou unleashed his vampiric power in anger. Demonic energy exploded from every pore, so vast as to make the very air creak, taking the form of an enormous lion shrouded by lightning. This was potent demonic energy condensed into physical form—a vampiric Beast Vassal summoned from another world.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum—!”

“A Beast Vassal of the...Fourth Primogenitor?!”

Beholding Kojou’s Beast Vassal with his own eyes, an air of faint surprise spread over the man’s face. But only for a moment. Composing himself and staring at the lightning lion barreling toward him from overhead, the man calmly raised his right hand.

“Awaken, Archadia.”

“Wha—?!”

It was Kojou who let out a shocked voice. From out of thin air, the black-haired man summoned a long sword resembling a whip with a saw for a blade. Swung by some invisible, giant arm, the long sword moved at the speed of an electric flash, blocking the lightning lion's claw from the front—and pushing it back.

“As expected, incredible force. Enough that even Archadia cannot hold.”

Brushing away the aftershocks of the titanic clash of demonic energy with visible annoyance, the man smiled ferociously.

“However, that is all. Dance, Ghoul—!”

“Oh cra—”

The sudden appearance of a swarm of enormous short swords sent Kojou's expression twisting in despair. The man's Beast Vassals were targeting Glenda rather than Kojou.

Kojou instinctively reached a hand toward Glenda, but her own body was in the way, rendering him unable to summon a new Beast Vassal. With the girl frozen in terror, the dark short swords rained down upon her.

However, just in the nick of time, a flash from a silver blade shrouded in pale radiance struck down every single sword.

“—Snowdrift Wolf!”

Leaping clear over the roof's fence was a girl dressed in a gym outfit, twirling a long silver-colored spear around as she intercepted the horde of sentient swords. The vampiric Beast Vassal, presumably immune to any and all physical attacks, offered all the resistance of paper as it split apart and vanished. These Schneewaltzers were said to be the Lion King Agency's secret weapons—purging spears with the power to nullify all demonic energy and rend any kind of barrier.

“Himeragi!”

“—Are you all right, senpai?!”

Having finished intercepting the Beast Vassals, Yukina Himeragi held her spear at the ready as she posed the question. Glancing at the sight of Glenda naked

under a parka, a complex expression rose to her face.



“...Senpai, there is a great deal I wish to say to you, but ensuring Glenda’s safety is our first priority.”

“Let’s leave it at that... Um, why are you in your gym clothes, Himeragi?”

“I slipped out right before gym class! But is now really the time for a question like that?! Please take this seriously!”

“It’s not like I’m fooling around here!”

Kojou left his lightning lion materialized as he turned to face the black-haired vampire. He didn’t want to do anything to stand out too much within Saikai Academy, but this man wasn’t an opponent he could fight without a Beast Vassal.

Fortunately, Regulus Aurum’s lightning bolts danced around Kojou and the others, which ought to have hid them from the other students. All he could do beyond that was hope his classmates took shelter before they were caught up in the conflict.

“I see, so this is a Schneewaltzer... You have quite a troublesome weapon, certainly worthy of one calling herself the Fourth Primogenitor’s watcher.”

The black-haired vampire let out a sigh as he stared at the spear Yukina wielded. However, even though he had just called it troublesome, his composed demeanor remained intact. He was likely confident that he could simultaneously defeat Kojou and Yukina. That might even be true—Kojou, squared off against him, could sense no end to his opponent’s strength.

“Boy selected by the Fourth Primogenitor, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, this is my final warning. Hand over the Dragon of the Swamp.”

The ghastly aura surrounding the black-haired vampire shot out forcefully. It became a physical pressure that caused the very air to tremble. Had they been human beings with weak resistance to demonic energy, this alone might have been enough to knock them unconscious. There was simply too much demonic energy.

Perhaps overwhelmed by that incredibly ghastly aura, Glenda grasped her own shoulders, shivering slightly. Shielding Glenda, Kojou glared right at the

man.

“I told you—don’t mess with me.”

A torrent of malevolent demonic energy spewed from Kojou’s entire body like billowing flames. This slammed into the opposing vampire’s own demonic energy, making the air bend and shimmer with heat haze.

“Very well, boy. Then, perish along with this accursed island!” he shouted, fangs bared.

He spread both arms wide as if to summon a new Beast Vassal. Kojou clicked his tongue. Yukina bent her knees, lowering her center of gravity.

A moment later, silver chains shot out of thin air and coiled around the black-haired vampire.

The sudden attack twisted the man’s face for the first time.

“That is far enough, Velesh Aradahl—”

Natsuki Minamiya’s doll-like silhouette appeared before the eyes of Kojou and company with a rippling of the air. With a flutter of her extravagant, frilly dress, she haughtily tossed her head back at the enemy.

“This campus happens to be my place of work. As a teacher, I cannot shut my eyes to an outsider who means to bring harm to my students. I would be most grateful if you politely removed yourself.”

“Natsuki Minamiya...the Witch of the Void, yes?” Even with his Beast Vassal summoning sealed away, the black-haired vampire’s dignified demeanor was undaunted. “Someone merely possessed by a Demon would deign to defeat me?”

“If I chose to take this girl under my protection, do you really think there’s anything you would be able to do about it?” Natsuki laughed scornfully.

Aradahl grimaced.

Natsuki Minamiya, a witch specializing in teleportation magic, was the owner of a vast realm within her own dream that was known as the Prison Barrier. If she held Glenda within that barrier, Glenda would be forever lost to him. Aradahl understood that for himself.

“...Very well. Certainly, there is little to be gained from making an enemy of you. I deeply apologize for disturbing the sanctity of this campus, Witch of the Void.”

Aradahl made the statement in an honest-sounding tone. The ghastly aura swirling around the area neatly dissipated, almost like it had never existed.

“A wise decision, Velesh Aradahl. It seems that you are different from that Master of Serpents.”

Speaking in a haughty tone, Natsuki recalled her silver chains. Aradahl twisted his lips in silence. Apparently, he did not like being compared to the Master of Serpents—Dimitrie Vattler.

“Boy. Your name?”

That same Aradahl suddenly looked at Kojou and asked that question. His voice was quiet and tense.

“Kojou. Kojou Akatsuki.”

Aradahl’s oddly formal demeanor put Kojou off. Aradahl solemnly nodded, removing the glove that covered his right hand, tossing it at Kojou’s feet.

“Then, Kojou Akatsuki—in the name of Velesh Aradahl, chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire, I formally challenge you to a duel.”

“...A duel?”

Aradahl’s extremely behind-the-times phraseology made Kojou’s jaw drop.

Of course, seriously being challenged to a duel was a first for him. Yukina, standing beside Kojou, was also rigid, seemingly taken aback.

However, the black-haired vampire nodded with an extremely serious expression.

“Yes, a one-on-one match at sunset tonight. We meet at the breakwater in District D in the northern section of the artificial isle. We fight until an opponent acknowledges defeat or is rendered unable to continue fighting. Should you lose, you will surrender the Dragon of the Swamp to me.”

“...And if I win?” Kojou asked, regaining his senses.

He understood that Aradahl wasn't kidding around whatsoever.

"Yuri and Shio, you said... I shall return the two Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency to you. In addition, my Warlord's Empire shall promise never to raise a hand against the Dragon of the Swamp again."

"Can I trust you?"

"I swear upon the name of our Primogenitor."

Aradahl, perhaps taking Kojou's words as implicit acceptance of the duel, strongly made that declaration.

Kojou was left with no option but to accept his proposal.

Judging from his exchanges so far with the black-haired vampire, Kojou understood that he was a stickler for formality. This challenge was unlikely to be a trap.

Nor were his proposal's details so one-sided that Kojou got nothing out of them.

Either way, fighting him was unavoidable if Kojou wanted to protect Glenda. At the very least, a duel meant that no one other than Kojou would get caught up in the fighting in the process.

"Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency and Witch of the Void—I request your presence as formal witnesses for the duel. I imagine this makes my proposal more trustworthy to you?"

"Very well. That would only be proper," Natsuki agreed.

Yukina, on the other hand, hesitated, clenching her spear as she shifted her eyes toward the side of Kojou's face. Then, her mind apparently made up, she nodded.

"If that is what the two of you desire."

"Well met. Then, I shall leave the Dragon of the Swamp in your custody for now."

Aradahl nodded in satisfaction, the sleeves of his coat draped over his shoulders fluttering as he turned his back to them. Smoky black mist

surrounded him, and his back dissolved into thin air. Finally, all traces of his presence vanished, leaving behind only the single glove he had taken off and discarded. It was unclear whether the exasperated sigh that followed began with Kojou or Yukina.

“Velesh Aradah!...chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire, huh...”

“Yes. I have heard of him. It is said he is a martial artist aristocrat, wielder of the Seven Sword Beast Vassals.”

As Kojou clutched his head lightly, Yukina bit her lip, conflicted. She’d voiced no complaint over the duel only because she knew he’d had no other option.

“He is strong, Kojou Akatsuki... Quite possibly stronger than that Dimitrie Vattler,” Natsuki said, delivering the cold, hard truth.

“Seems like it, yeah,” he acknowledged.

Having actually fought the man, Kojou had sensed that as well. Aradah! had bottomless strength, even compared to that maniac Vattler. His power was legitimate, backed by finely honed might. On top of that, he had no openings. Even with the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, he wasn’t sure that he could win.

But still..., he thought.

“Kojou.”

The fingertips of the dragon girl grasped hold of Kojou’s back. Glenda, trembling in fear up to that point, looked up at Kojou as she desperately pleaded to him.

“Save Yui and Shio...”

Kojou nodded with a smile. Aradah! was, without doubt, a frightening opponent. In terms of combat proficiency and experience as a vampire, Kojou couldn’t hold a candle to him. He couldn’t even dream of how to bridge the gap.

But even so..., he thought. *If there’s any meaning to the stupid power, the stupid name of the Fourth Primogenitor, it has to be for the sake of protecting*

the people within my reach.

“Yeah, of course—”

Kojou responded resolutely to Glenda, which helped to put her at ease.

Immediately afterward, the girl’s expression brightened. “Dah!” she called out in her usual tone of voice, tackling Kojou into a one-sided hug with the force of someone leaping off a diving board.

Kojou only remembered the rather crucial fact that she was naked when his parka, the only thing Glenda was wearing, slipped down off her shoulders. The dragon girl’s smooth skin and innocent breaths mercilessly stimulated Kojou’s senses. Kojou detected a metallic scent in his nose as he toppled over in spectacular fashion. Gazing at this, Yukina’s shoulders quivered with silent rage.

“Kojou! Kojou!”

“I get it! I get it already; so, Glenda, back up a little, okay?!”

“Senpai, your nose is bleeding! A-and how long are you going to embrace each other?! Glenda, put some clothes on—!” shouted Yukina, who had somehow become the third wheel. The commotion echoed across the school rooftop.

Natsuki shook her head in exasperation as all tension vanished in the blink of an eye.

It was at that moment when the students remaining within the school grounds began to notice them. Nervousness hit Kojou like a ton of bricks as he sensed the impending doom of his own public standing.

Even amid that uproar, Kojou felt a faint whiff of doubt in a rational corner in the back of his mind.

Chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire, Velesh Aradah!—
Why was he after the dragon girl’s life to begin with...?



CHAPTER TWO
DUEL AT TWILIGHT

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DUEL AT TWILIGHT

1

“Whaaat? A duel?!”

Sayaka Kirasaka’s exclamation reverberated throughout the building.

The air was dry and a little dusty. The color-coordinated furniture was antiquated. Old-school dolls and clocks lined the shelves in a disorganized fashion.

The atmosphere of the run-down antique shop’s second floor resembled that of a foreign café. This was the Lion King Agency’s branch office on Itogami Island, a duty station that handled communications and resupply for Lion King Agency personnel active within the Demon Sanctuary.

Thanks to the uproar stirred by Aradahl’s flying boat, which forced Saikai Academy to suspend classes for the day, Kojou and Yukina were visiting the antique shop for the first time in a while. Their objective was to report about Yui’s and Shio’s current circumstances, and if possible, they hoped to get information on Aradahl and maybe even hammer out countermeasures against him.

It was an unexpected coincidence that they came face-to-face with Sayaka inside that shop. Apparently, she’d just arrived on Itogami Island on some sort of secret mission. The fact that she was wearing her usual trendy blazer meant she was likely meeting some kind of foreign VIP.

It was this Sayaka who raised her refined eyebrows high in agitation as she closed the distance with Kojou.

“What the hell were you thinking, Kojou Akatsuki?! The opponent’s the

chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire, you know?!"

"Uh... Yeah, seems like it."

"Seems like it; why, you little..."

Kojou's lackadaisical response made Sayaka gawk, her quivering lips betraying her desperation.

Mounted on her shoulder was a black cat with a refined mane. Glaring at Kojou with golden eyes, the black cat suddenly began to speak with human words.

"Goodness. A duel with Velesh Aradah! of all people. And over a woman, no less. We have known each other but a short while, Fourth Primogenitor lad. I shall at least pray that your soul might pass on."

"Master...!"

Yukina made a nervous rebuke as the black cat mercilessly fanned the flames of Kojou's despair.

The black cat that understood human speech was the magical familiar of Yukina and Sayaka's master—an elven magician named Yukari Endou. Yukari was using her feline familiar to speak to Kojou and the others from far away on the mainland. This was frighteningly high-level sorcery. However, that aside, seeing Yukina and Sayaka in genuine conversation with a cat always struck Kojou as a comical scene no matter how many times he witnessed it.

"So you open by saying that I'm gonna get killed..." Kojou grumbled, grimacing in dismay.

"Heh-heh," said the cat with a twitch of her whiskers. "Of course. You're facing someone who can boast over nine centuries of combat experience, a monster even among monsters. I can hardly imagine a half-witted vampire like you holding your own against such an opponent. Goodness, how foolish. Even dogs and cats know better than to pick a fight with an opponent they cannot defeat."

"...I didn't pick a fight with him at all. He's the one who challenged me to a duel."

Kojou gave a weak rebuttal. He was well aware that he might not have been the one to make the challenge, but he was the one who'd foolishly given in to provocation.

"I am sorry, Master. I was right there, yet I was unable to stop either of them..."

Listening to Yukari Endou's conversation, Yukina dejectedly hung her head. She seemed to genuinely regret not having stopped Kojou from agreeing to the duel.

"Nothing you gotta apologize for, Himeragi. Glenda was depending on me in the first place, and it would've been bad if that Aradahl bastard let loose on school grounds any further."

Kojou both stood up for Yukina and added some excuses for himself.

Looking back on it objectively, he didn't think there had been any great blame to cast on their decisions at the time. No matter how many words they might exhaust to persuade him, Kojou didn't think the uptight Aradahl really would have given up on capturing Glenda. The duel with him was unavoidable...even if it was a hopeless battle.

"Glenda... The dragon hatchling resting at the bottom of Kannawa Lake... The Kuraki lass awoke something truly troublesome, didn't she? Hmph." The black cat sourly exhaled.

"Master, you knew Glenda's true nature?" Yukina asked quizzically.

"I knew nothing of her. I have simply heard various rumors about her. As a matter of fact, beings said to be relics of The Cleansing are not as rare as you might believe. Legends of dragons have been left scattered all across the globe. For there to be one more at this late hour is hardly enough for a ruckus this size."

"So why is that Aradahl guy after Glenda, then?"

Kojou furled his brows as he posed the question. This was the same misgiving he'd felt when he first encountered Aradahl. He didn't understand why a key player of the Warlord's Empire would be so obsessed with a mere dragon hatchling that he would resort to a method as idiotic as a duel.

Furthermore, it wasn't because he saw any value in using Glenda; if anything, it was the exact opposite. Aradahl was trying to capture Glenda so he could dispose of her.

"I truly do not know," the elf's black cat familiar replied with an indifferent tone.

"One might pass it off as the distaste vampires—particularly those close to the primogenitors—have for relics of The Cleansing, yet, it is quite abnormal for such a major figure to put in a personal appearance. As for the talk of this dragon being dangerous—in the first place, is the girl truly a dragon?"

"I'd love to ask someone that, but I don't personally know any other dragons, so..."

Kojou shook his head in indifference. Whether Glenda truly was a dragon or something else didn't really matter to him. The Glenda that Kojou knew was a cheerful, outgoing girl with a somewhat eccentric personality. On top of that, he owed her for saving his life when he was on the verge of being annihilated by Nod. He couldn't just abandon her no matter what the reason might be.

"Well, either way, it is not something you need to be concerned about."

The black cat cut off the conversation coldly.

"And why's that?"

Kojou stared at the animal in dissatisfaction. However, Yukari Endou's familiar seemed to mock him as she narrowed her eyes.

"Well, think about it. In half a day's time, you will have been destroyed by Aradahl, and the dragon girl will have been handed over to the Warlord's Empire. Two troublesome issues solved for the price of one, something for which the Lion King Agency shall be most grateful."

"M-Master! Even if it is to Kojou Akatsuki, there are some things a person simply should not say!"

Unexpectedly, the one whose cheek nervously twitched as she chided her master was Sayaka. As if to escape her words, the black cat shifted to the top of her head, whereupon Kojou glared at her.

“And you’re fine with all this? He has Yuiri and Shio hostage, you know.”

“Be it fair or foul, it is those girls who turned their blades toward Aradahl after he made his identity known and invoked the name of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization. That is a far graver matter,” the cat said, annoyed, letting out a sigh.

Yui and Shio had thus ended up hostile to Aradahl, an envoy of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization, of their own free will. Their position was fundamentally different from Yukina, who had merely come to Kojou’s aid. Worst case, the Lion King Agency itself would be viewed as opposing the organization—that was the delicate situation they were in.

“Well, I’m sure there is no need to worry about them. Aradahl is a stiflingly formal man, after all. At the very least, he will surely hold them captive under polite conditions until the duel is over.”

“What’ll happen to Yuiri and Shio if I lose the duel, then?” Kojou asked with a serious expression.

There was no guarantee that Aradahl would simply let the girls go unconditionally after defeating Kojou. But nor could it be said that his releasing them was a certainty. When that time came, the Lion King Agency would rescue the girls—even if it was a lie, it was what he wanted Yukari to say.

However, Yukari’s familiar made no such reply. The animal somehow smiled, admiring Kojou. “My, my. You’re quite composed, aren’t you, Fourth Primogenitor lad? If you have time to worry about other people, shouldn’t you be focusing on the things you really want to get done? You should not leave behind any regrets.”

“You sure like delivering bad omens, don’t you...?”

“Ngh,” Kojou grumbled, his face contorting. Yukari’s sardonic statements rubbed him the wrong way, but he knew full well that this was no mere sarcasm.

Even if vampire primogenitors were said to have near-limitless immortality, that didn’t make them invincible. It was possible to neutralize one through petrification or freezing, for instance, and there was also the method of simply

destroying the mind.

And combat between fellow vampires always came with the danger of cannibalism. Through a vampiric act, one could rob the opponent of his very identity—something Kojou had experienced for himself when he obtained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor.

At any rate, it meant that losing to Aradahl came with a fairly high possibility of Kojou being annihilated. So she was warning him to ensure he had no regrets.

“Even if you tell me to do whatever I like...” Kojou shrugged. *Nothing really comes to mind.*

Despite being told he might vanish from the face of the Earth, Kojou just didn’t think it felt real, nor did he feel much like writing a will. If he greeted his friends to say good-bye, he’d only be exposing them to danger.

What should I do?

Feeling a need to seek advice, he turned to Yukina beside him. In that instant, Sayaka’s eyes opened wide in shock, as if she’d just realized something...

“By things you want to do, you don’t mean— N-no, you mustn’t! If you’re thinking of something lewd with Yukina, you mustn’t, okay?!”

“Wha...?! What the heck?! I wasn’t thinking of anything like that, geez!”

Showered in unjust blame, Kojou’s voice went shrill as he launched a retort. “Oh, really?!” yelled Sayaka as she wedged herself between Kojou and Yukina, lobbing a suspicious gaze toward him. *And that’s your fantasy*, Kojou was about to point out, but when he opened his mouth to do so—

“Hmph, that might not be a bad idea.”

It was Yukari’s black cat familiar making that murmur in an oddly overserious tone.

“Master!!”

Though Sayaka’s voice made a shout approaching a lament, the black cat distinctly ignored her as she turned and faced Yukina directly.

“You have only just formed a pact with your lord, and here you are on the brink of possibly losing him. Because you are his Blood Concubine, no one would chastise you for giving him one final little freebie. Am I wrong?”

“Freebie...you say?” Yukina’s voice went cold.

“That’s right,” said the black cat with a nod, not forgetting to add, “a very generous one at that.”

Hearing this exchange, Sayaka stopped moving, as if a lightning bolt had struck her dead on the spot. She had just noticed the presence of a ring on Yukina’s left ring finger.

“No way... Concubine... You don’t mean...”

Her gaze wandering about, Sayaka stretched a hand to an instrument case standing against the wall. Then, with a half-instinctual motion, she drew the silver long sword within, pointing its tip toward Kojou.

“K...Kojou Akatsuki! How long have you been enjoying such a depraved relationship with Yukina—?!”

“Whoa?!”

Kojou just barely managed to evade the tip of the sword thrust at him with bloodlust evident. As Kojou’s face stiffened in shock, Sayaka glared back at him with teary eyes.

“Why did you dodge it?! You made Yukina a vampire’s vassal—!”

“Idiot, you’re wrong! Himeragi and I don’t have that kind of relationship at—”

“Shut up!! You did something to Yukina behind my back, didn’t you?!”

“I’m telling you: I didn’t... Okay... It’s not that I didn’t do anything...but...”

Kojou’s retort was halting and awkward.

Yukina becoming Kojou’s nominal partner was to protect her from angelification, a side effect of wielding Snowdrift Wolf. It had been an unavoidable choice to save a debilitated Yukina from fading away entirely.

All that said, Yukina had been granted Snowdrift Wolf so she could monitor Kojou, and most of her uses of that spear were directly connected to Kojou

personally. He couldn't exactly call himself disconnected from her circumstances.

"How dare you... How dare you lay a hand on my Yukina... You repeatedly forced her into depraved acts against her will, didn't you, Pervogenitor?!"

"Whaddaya mean, repeatedly?! What the hell are you imagining...?!"

As Sayaka swung her sword around, Kojou caught her arms, somehow bringing her under control.

The pair proceeded to get entwined with each other as they collided against the shop's interior wall. It looked like Kojou was pinning the resisting Sayaka to the wall against her will. Sayaka was tall for a girl, so she wasn't much shorter than Kojou. As Kojou ended up staring at a misty-eyed Sayaka at point-blank range, he was struck by an irrational sense of guilt.

"Please calm down, Sayaka. Also, senpai, how long do you intend to stay close to her like that?"

Yukina gazed coldly at the two of them, practically entangled with each other, as she let out a sigh.

Yukari's black cat familiar hopped off Sayaka's head, landing neatly in Yukina's arms. Yukina peered into the feline's pupils as she posed a question in a very serious tone.



“Essentially, if senpai beats the Duke of Severin, there is no issue, yes? Then it is unnecessary for senpai to worry about regrets or for me to give him any kind of generous freebie—”

“I don’t remember demanding a freebie from Himeragi, y’know...!” Kojou exclaimed.

And whaddaya mean by freebie anyway?

Sayaka, still forced up against Kojou, indignantly thrashed her body around. She did not seem to appreciate that she was pressing her bountiful breasts against Kojou’s chest in the process. However, if he carelessly put any distance between them, she seemed ready to suddenly come slicing at him again, so Kojou couldn’t move away from her at that moment in time.

“As I have been saying, that is wholly unreasonable. That young lad cannot win against Aradah!.”

“Well, that sure is putting it bluntly...”

Kojou no longer had any mental energy left with which to argue. The black cat turned an indifferent eye on him as he sulked.

“The Fourth Primogenitor is said to be the World’s Mightiest Vampire for one reason: The Beast Vassals that serve him are ridiculously powerful. They were created to sweep the armies of Cain the Sinful God aside, so they are, without exaggeration, the World’s Mightiest Beast Vassals.”

“Yeah...”

Come to think of it... Kojou remembered that Aradah! had said something similar. He’d acknowledged the might of Kojou’s Beast Vassals. But he had dismissed them regardless.

“The issue is that you cannot fully control them. No matter how high spec the race car, in the hands of an amateur, even a tofu delivery truck would leave it in the dust. That’s simply natural, yes?”

“...Tofu?”

The example raised by Yukari’s familiar caused Yukina to blink back confusion. With Sayaka finally calm, Kojou pulled away from her, turning his face toward

the black cat Yukina cradled in her arms.

“Control the Beast Vassals, huh... If I could do that, I could go up against Aradahl, then?”

“Theoretically speaking, yes.”

Even if that is impossible in reality was the undertone to the black cat’s words. In point of fact, it was difficult to imagine Kojou’s combat capabilities undergoing a dramatic increase during the not-even-half-a-day’s worth of time remaining.

However, Kojou ignored that and continued his line of thought. “Then, what do I need to do to control the Beast Vassals?”

“Unfortunately, even I do not know the answer to that. One should ask a vampire about vampire things.”

The cat’s reply was blunt. Unsurprisingly, Kojou clutched his head.

“Ask a vampire... Easier said than done...”

“In terms of vampires on Itogami Island potentially able to stand against the Duke of Severin... I cannot think of anyone save the Duke of Ardeal, but...”

Sayaka murmured this, as if seeing right through to Kojou’s underlying concern. Her anger had not completely subsided, but she seemed to have abandoned slicing Kojou to ribbons for the moment, at least.

“By Duke of Ardeal, you mean Vattler...”

Just remembering Dimitrie Vattler’s snobbishly smiling face brought a look of plain distaste over Kojou. Certainly, among the aristocrats of the Warlord’s Empire known to Kojou, he was a powerful vampire in a different league. A man appraised as the closest thing to a primogenitor himself probably could stand up to Aradahl, but...

“I don’t think he’s gonna just teach me how to use my Beast Vassals with no benefit to him...”

“Well, get on your hands and knees and beg. In case you weren’t aware, your life is on the line.”

“I mean, technically or not, he is a vampire of the Warlord’s Empire, so if anything, wouldn’t he be on Aradahl’s side? And even if he did teach me something, is it all right for me to just believe what he says?”

“Well, there’s no other vampire who is equal or superior to the Duke of Severin around here, so you don’t have a choice!” Sayaka squared her shoulders in anger as she glared at Kojou.

Her opinion was a sensible one, but even so, he couldn’t think of relying on Vattler as being much of a plan.

That man, a renowned combat maniac, normally made no effort to hide his bloodlust toward Kojou. He was dangerous enough that, one false move, and he might say he would slay him by his own hand before Kojou was slain by Aradahl instead.

In the end, it came down to whether to bow his head to Vattler and brave the danger anyway or to fight on his own—

Kojou anguished over the two extreme choices.

“No...”

Yukina’s clear voice severed that indecision in half. Kojou and company stared at her in surprise. Yukina, confirming her own thought, nodded.

“There is another... A powerful vampire that seems likely to lend senpai his strength...”

“Himeragi?” Kojou said in bewilderment. “Who do you mean?”

But Yukina didn’t reply. Then, with an oddly serious expression, she gave the antique clock hanging inside the shop a glance. The clock’s needle showed that it was a little past noon.

“Senpai.”

“Y-yeah...?”

The tenor of Yukina’s voice, serious even by her standards, made Kojou straighten his back. Yukina stared fixedly at Kojou, and finally, her mind made up, she told him...

“Let’s go get some ramen.”

2

The shop was quietly open for business in a back alley in Island West.

It wasn’t a trendy shop by any stretch of the imagination. Its storefront was an old-fashioned mix of bright and dark colors, and the interior of the shop had bar-style counter seating with only four seats. Because the shop was so small, four patrons brought it to full capacity.

However, it was quietly known as a shop of hidden renown among those dwelling on Itogami Island versed in the ways of ramen. Pacific Dipped Noodles was the shop’s name.

“No matter how you slice it, I don’t think we can simply find him just like that...”

Not quite on board, Kojou grumbled as he peered into the dim shop’s interior when he felt a little dizzy, placing his hand against a wall.

With an oddly bold demeanor, a foreign-born boy appearing to be twelve or thirteen was at the counter, rearranging his seat. He had beautiful black hair, olive skin, and a mysterious dignity that did not suit his youthful external appearance—this was Prince Iblisveil Aziz of the Fallen Dynasty, the Dominion of the Middle East, ruled by the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer. He was precisely the individual whom Kojou and Yukina had gone to that shop in search of.

“Why the hell are you stuffing your face with ramen again?!”

Kojou slumped his shoulders as he commented on the irrationality of it all. Stronger than elation that he had bumped into the person he sought was the sense that he’d been had. *We don’t know his whereabouts* was the biggest concern Kojou and Yukina had. The prince’s lodgings were a diplomatic secret, and even failing that, it was next to impossible to pursue a high-level vampire who could freely move around in mist form.

The single lead they had was that Iblisveil was a ramen aficionado. It was from

this that Yukina proposed to search famous shops on the island for him. A sketchy plan indeed.

And as it worked out, they'd located Iblisveil with ease.

Kojou felt unable to make peace with that fact. He was struck by the overwhelming urge to poke fun, like *Wait, you're a prince, and you eat ramen every day?* Well, technically, it was dipped noodles, not ramen, but still...

"Do you always barge in on other people's meals and cause some sort of uproar? Honestly, how rude of you, Kojou Akatsuki."

Iblisveil looked back at Kojou with a skeptical expression and calmly delivered his reply. His exceedingly correct and proper assertion made Kojou go "Sorry" and bow his head.

"Yeah, my bad. I seriously didn't expect to bump into you, so I got thrown for a loop, see."

"Hmm."

Bringing the dipped noodles to his lips, Iblisveil savored the taste as he raised an eyebrow.

This golden-eyed boy was the vampire Yukina had meant—one possessing strength on par with Aradahl. He, a prince of the Fallen Dynasty, was not only well versed in the employment of Beast Vassals, but he was also unrelated to Aradahl; he was a neutral party. That didn't make him an ally of Kojou's, either, but seeking advice from him was at least worth a try.

"Well, fine. To coldly refuse a guest and drive him away would bring the Dynasty into disrepute—first, have a seat, Fourth Primogenitor and servant girl thereof. Pardon me, please give my guests the same thing I'm having."

Iblisveil spoke in a high-handed manner as he pointed to the seats near him, which just happened to be empty. As Kojou watched, the stout, stern-faced shopkeeper nodded, not speaking a single complaint. That was no doubt the work of the charisma the boy had possessed since birth. Kojou and Yukina politely indulged in Iblisveil's goodwill. Besides, the scent of soup wafting around the shop reminded Kojou that he was hungry.

Sitting down on an antiquated chair, Kojou brought a cup of cold water to his lips.

“Come to think, it would seem that you are to engage Velesh Aradah! in a duel.”

Iblisveil spoke these words without any change in his expression. Taken by surprise, Kojou immediately began to choke on his water.

“Why do you of all people know about that—?!”

“Because I received an invitation to the event not too long ago.”

Iblisveil took an extravagantly ornamented, wax-sealed scroll out of the sleeve of his outer garment. The back of the sealed scroll had a flying dragon and a tank drawn on it, the crest of the Warlord’s Empire.

“A letter of invitation...?”

“The work of the Warlord Empire’s Master of Serpents, most likely. No doubt the scoundrel has some ulterior motive, but it certainly is a match of compelling interest, all the more because it is a battle over the Dragon of the Swamp.”

“Vattler... That jerk... He’s gonna fool around even with something like this...?!”

Kojou clutched his head and flopped forward onto the table. He could take from the fact that a letter of invitation had reached Iblisveil that rumors of the duel between Kojou and Aradah! had already spread far and wide.

Sitting at Kojou’s side, a hard expression came over Yukina as well. She did not understand why Vattler would spread such rumors.

Iblisveil watched Kojou with amusement. He smiled. “So grasping that you cannot win against Aradah! as you are now, you’ve come to me for training, Fourth Primogenitor?”

“Yep.”

Kojou nodded with a pained expression. He proceeded to bow his head deeply.

“I know it’s very selfish of me to say this, but I’m asking you anyway. Please

teach me a way to beat Aradahl. Glenda's life is on the line."

"My... What shall I do? Having you owe me a favor is not unappealing, but is that really worth purchasing Aradahl's displeasure in turn?"

"...At the very least, it'll make for a more exciting duel."

"Hmm?"

A faint trace of curiosity came to life in Iblisveil's golden eyes. It was the reaction Kojou had expected.

He'd had an instant flash of inspiration the moment he saw the letter of invitation from Vattler.

Iblisveil was an unaging, undying vampire. Though he had the appearance of a boy, he had already lived several centuries. The greatest enemy of their kind was *boredom*. Having already tasted to exhaustion most of the pleasures the world had to offer, living began to feel like a chore.

To the Old Guard vampires, there was but one pleasure remaining to them—putting their lives on the line in mortal combat.

Even if he was not recognized as someone as battle-obsessed as Vattler, Iblisveil surely hungered for blood and combat all the same. A man like that could not fail to hold interest in a duel between Kojou and Aradahl.

"As I am now, I don't stand a chance against Aradahl. I'll probably lose in one second, and then the duel will be over."

"And you think that if I lend you a hand, you can win against Aradahl?"

"I don't know that for sure, but I think it'll be a better show than it is right now, at least," Kojou said, holding Iblisveil's stare.

He felt like he might waver from the powerful glint in the prince of the Fallen Dynasty's gaze, but even so, he did not avert his eyes.

Though nonplussed by the bizarre air hovering over the table, a young server brought Kojou's and Yukina's noodles. Iblisveil's expression abruptly eased. The strained air around them relaxed.

"I do not understand."

Iblisveil murmured this as he audibly sipped his dipped noodles.

“Huh?” Kojou replied in bewilderment.

Iblisveil stuffed his cheeks with an entire boiled egg as he looked back at Kojou.

“Surely you have neither a reason nor a goal for which to take the Dragon of the Swamp into your hands. And yet, why are you trying to fight Aradahl to this extent? He is likely an opponent even I cannot defeat with ease.”

“That doesn’t mean I can just shut up and watch. Not when the other guy’s trying to kill Glenda.”

“Knowing full well that the Dragon of the Swamp is a dangerous being?”

“That’s—”

Kojou began to speak, but he shook his head instead. He knew neither Glenda’s true nature nor the reason why Aradahl viewed her as dangerous. And he didn’t particularly want to know. That was because Kojou’s decision had nothing to do with anything like that.

“Nah... I suppose you’re right. It’s just as you said, Prince.”

“Mmm?”

“You’re right. I’ve got no reason to save her. I tried to help her because that’s what I wanted to do—that’s all.”

“And for that reason alone, a death match with Aradahl is unavoidable?”

Iblisveil drew attention to that point. Kojou mixed in a pained smile as he shrugged.

“Not that I planned on actually killing him, mind you.”

“I see. It seems I have harbored something of a misunderstanding about you... You are a far more arrogant man than I appreciated, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Iblisveil smiled with a brilliant expression, both seeming beside himself and somehow admiring him for it.

“Whaaa—?” retorted Kojou in dismay. He could not comprehend why he was being spoken ill of in that manner.

“Have you realized, Kojou Akatsuki? Without even a reason or an objective, you act in accordance with your desires, deciding even whether your foe lives or dies by your discretion alone—that is a way of thinking permitted only to those of absolute might, a privilege of royalty itself. Perhaps you truly are an instrument worthy of being a primogenitor. That, or you are a truly incorrigible fool.”

The weight of Iblisveil’s opinion stunned Kojou into silence. He still felt like he was being made fun of to some extent, but the prince’s mood did not seem poor. Whatever he was trying to get at, Kojou’s reply seemed to have left him satisfied.

“In deference to your foolishness, I will grant you a single piece of advice.” Still grasping his chopsticks, Iblisveil solemnly opened his mouth. “It is not / whom you should be asking for advice—”

“...Huh?”

Kojou gaped at Iblisveil, somehow feeling disappointed. He’d called it advice, but in the end, wasn’t that pretty much the same as saying nothing at all?

“That’s...it?”

“If you come to realize who you should really be asking, Aradahl will be no match for your blade,” Iblisveil said. “And if you cannot, you are done either way.” He sipped his delicious-looking noodle soup.

In a daze, Kojou watched him. The advice from the prince of the Fallen Dynasty was at once a simple yet frighteningly difficult riddle. However, Kojou didn’t think he was lying.

Kojou could stand up to Aradahl. Someone could teach him how. However, that person wasn’t Iblisveil—that was what Iblisveil meant.

“Once, I lost to a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor,” Iblisveil began, almost like he was talking to himself.

“Huh?”

Kojou gasped and lifted his face. He realized that this was some kind of crucial hint. A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor had defeated Iblisveil, who was

probably on par with Aradahl—

“Accordingly, I feared the resurrection of Root.”

“Yeah,” went Kojou with a nod.

The real Fourth Primogenitor, Root Aurora, who had once wielded that awesome might as a god-killing weapon—

Kojou had fought her on the verge of her complete resurrection and stolen the power of the Fourth Primogenitor in the process. The source of her power was her right to rule the Beast Vassals.

However, Iblisveil laughed derisively, seeming to mock Kojou.

His sharp white fangs poked out from the corners of his lips.

“Yet, I do not fear you in the slightest. You should think about why that is.”

3

Nagisa Akatsuki and Kanon Kanase were carrying their respective beloved eco-bags as they left the store.

Inside the bags were eggs, flour, sugar, and salt in modest quantities, apricot jam, and various kinds of chocolate—ingredients for chocolate cake. Since there just happened to be a school break, this gave Nagisa the time to make handmade chocolates for Kojou.

“She...broke his heart? Akatsuki’s?”

With glossy-blue eyes reminiscent of glaciers, Kanon blinked heavily. She was just hearing about the shocking scene Nagisa had witnessed at Thetis Mall the day before. Gossiping about other people’s love lives wasn’t something Nagisa especially liked to do, but she’d judged that if it was with Kanon, then it was fine.

Kanon was an acquaintance of Kojou’s, after all, and she wasn’t the sort to circulate things said in confidence. Besides, her help was indispensable for making cake for Kojou’s sake.

“Mmm... I’m not sure he’s heartbroken or if he just feels abandoned... Well,

it's largely him reaping what he sowed, mind you," Nagisa said, conflicted, her brows knit in spite of her smile.

The fact that Asagi Aiba had been in the company of a boy other than Kojou was actually much more of a shock to Nagisa than anyone else. Faced with the impact of that, she could bluntly say that a giant flying boat nearly grazing the campus rooftop as it barreled forward, and the lightning strike uproar that occurred immediately after, were completely trivial in comparison.

To Nagisa, who'd spent nearly half her middle school years in a hospital room, Asagi was a precious friend of the same gender. Often, she felt like a biological older sister. The fact that Asagi took a liking to Kojou was plain as day to everyone but Asagi herself, but that made Nagisa adore her all the more.

"In the first place, it's strange for a girl like Asagi to not have a boyfriend after all this time. Goodness, this is because Kojou was too slow to make a move!"

Nagisa tapered her lips in a pout as they waited for the traffic light at an intersection to change.

She wasn't about to blame Asagi for her change of heart. She just thought it was rather sad. However, she couldn't help but feel annoyed at Kojou on several levels for making Asagi come to that decision.

Though, Nagisa had seen the sight of Kojou nervous with her very own eyes.

Even if it was a matter of what goes around comes around, she did feel sorry for him. So she thought that the least she could do was offer him chocolate as a present in Asagi's stead.

"So that's the story. Sorry, Kano, asking you to use your kitchen all of a sudden. But I mean, I can't just whip up a present for Kojou at my place..."

"Not at all; I am quite all right with it. I meant to make some sweets either way."

Kanon shook her head and gently smiled. As usual, she had a beautiful appearance that was just plain unfair. Nagisa understood immediately why she was often called the Saint of Middle School. Having that Kanon give you Valentine's Day sweets might well be a huge deal in and of itself.

“Wha—?! Really? For who? Who are they for?”

Nagisa stared at Kanon with a twinkle in her eyes. Even if she wasn't a fan of irresponsibly spreading rumors, romantic tales told by the girl concerned were another matter entirely. Nagisa asked with her interest visibly piqued, but Kanon looked back at her with the same calm expression as usual.

“For everyone who normally takes care of me, and after that, pet-safe sweets for all the cats I'm taking care of, and of course to you and your big brother, Nagisa.”

“Really? Yeah, he'll be happy to get chocolates from you, Kano. But I see... Kano treats Kojou the same as a cat, huh...”

For a single second, Nagisa had renewed hope for her big brother and his freshly broken heart, but it did not seem she could place such high hopes upon Kanon's shoulders. Of course, with Kanon being so deeply afflicted with a love of cats to begin with, perhaps being the same as a cat in her eyes was reason for hope in itself.

The signal to cross lit up, and Nagisa and Kanon walked forward. Their destination was Natsuki Minamiya's apartment building, where Kanon was staying. She'd previously heard from Kanon about the presence there of an island kitchen worthy of a high-class mansion. She was in high spirits at being told she could make use of it that day.

“Ah...”

Nagisa came to a halt midway through the intersection. She noticed a girl standing on the sidewalk on the other side.

The girl was small—around Nagisa's height—and she wore a *yukata*. Thanks to her clothing, the impression she gave off was much different, but Nagisa could not possibly mistake her characteristic features for anyone else's.

Mysterious blond hair that seemed to change color depending on how it was exposed to light and gleaming blue eyes that shone like flames—

“Nagisa?”

Kanon looked back at Nagisa with a questioning expression. The traffic light

had already begun blinking. Nagisa gasped, came back to her senses, and hurried to finish crossing the intersection.

“Sorry, Kano. Hey, wait a sec!”

Without stopping, Nagisa proceeded to head toward the girl in the *yukata*.

Amid the noon sun bearing down, the blond girl watched Nagisa approach.

“December! You’re December, right?! I’m so glad, I was getting worried when I didn’t hear from you after the terrorist incident not too long ago.”

“December...?”

The blond-haired girl echoed Nagisa, who was racing over with such force she seemed to fly through the air.

“I see, the tenth month... That is what Dekatos called herself...”

“Huh?”

The girl’s indifferent reply felt like a cold brush-off to Nagisa. When she looked closely, the girl’s face looked exactly like December’s. However, this girl was so tense. The December that Nagisa knew possessed a far friendlier, more sociable air.

“Ah... Could I actually have...mistaken you for someone else?”

Nagisa straightened her back as she timidly posed the question. The girl in the *yukata* generously shook her head.

“Thou art without fault, for she and I were both born from an identical source.”

“Um... So I guess that makes you sisters, kind of?”

Though the girl’s archaic phrasing threw her off, Nagisa felt like she’d somehow grasped her meaning.

The girl in the *yukata* nodded.

“Thou art not mistaken. Thou aided my little sister in her time of need, Nagisa Akatsuki.”

“No, no, not at all. December was the one taking all kinds of care of me... Er,

huh? Why do you know my name?”

“’Tis not only her thou hath saved. ’Tis thee who hath linked thyself to my little sister’s life, for which ten thousand thanks art not sufficient.”

“R-right...”

After having come that far, Nagisa still could not comprehend the girl. It was not an issue of the complexity of her Japanese; she had no idea what the girl was speaking of to begin with.

However, the girl paid no heed to Nagisa’s confusion and, without warning, offered her right hand.

“Come with me, Nagisa Akatsuki. Accept the truth thou hath lost.”

“Huh...”

Invited by the girl in the *yukata*, Nagisa moved to take her hand. She could not grasp the meaning behind the girl’s words. However, the girl’s invitation had Charm behind it that made it difficult to refuse.

The fingertips Nagisa had subconsciously reached out with moved to graze the *yukata* girl’s fingertips—

“Nagisa, don’t!”

It was Kanon’s voice that stopped her without a single moment to spare. Nagisa, who was approaching the *yukata* girl without realizing it, was halted by Kanon from behind.

Seeing Kanon do so, the girl in the *yukata* quietly said, “Oh my,” a corner of her lips rising as if her interest had been piqued.

In contrast, Kanon was staring at the girl with blatant suspicion. Though Kanon seemed quite meek at first glance, the fact was, when it came to protecting other people, she had an obstinate side that did not shirk at sacrificing herself. Even under the gaze of this girl from parts unknown, she seemed to have no intention of letting go of Nagisa’s hand. And then—

“Your Highness!”

The leaves and branches of an ornamental roadside tree shook above

Nagisa's and Kanon's heads. A slender silhouette leaped down from them, landing with lithe movements reminiscent of a panther. It was a young woman with close-cropped silver hair. She wore a mysterious outfit with white fabric and gold thread embroidery that seemed to straddle some invisible line between a knight's ceremonial attire and a ninja outfit.

"Are you safe, Your Highness? Please fall back—"

The ninja girl drew a sword and, shielding Kanon and Nagisa, turned its blade toward the girl in the *yukata*.

"Miss Justina, wait. You must not attack her!" Kanon hurriedly moved to hold her back.

"Huh?! But this person is...!"

Clear bewilderment came over the silver-haired woman Kanon had called Justina.

Apparently, she was the person the kingdom of Aldegia had assigned to be Kanon's covert bodyguard. She'd no doubt leaped out in such a rush because she discerned that Kanon was in danger.

To a certain extent, Nagisa, too, had heard the information that Kanon was Aldegian royalty. Though she was a bit surprised by the fact, her willingness to accept it was stronger. After all, the floaty detached-from-the-world atmosphere Kanon gave off suited the title of princess very well, and from Nagisa's point of view, there wasn't much difference between a saint and a princess. Even so, the fact that the ninja-outfitted bodyguard had been there caught her by surprise.

"Kano... What was I doing just now...?"

Nagisa's voice trembled as she looked down at her outstretched right hand.

Nagisa didn't really understand why she was obeying the words of someone she didn't even know. But when she watched the girl, mysterious emotions came bubbling to the surface. It was something bizarre—like a mix of fear and affection.

"This spiritual energy... Thou art of the Royal Family of Aldegia, then? What is

thy name?” the *yukata*-clad girl asked, staring at Kanon propping Nagisa up.

“I am Kanon Kanase. And you are?” Kanon calmly replied, faltering in no way.

“Hmph,” said the girl, a smile appearing on her lips. “My name is Hektos—the sixth Kaleid Blood.”

“What?!” Justina exclaimed. She was a knight of the kingdom of Aldegia, which, bordering the Warlord’s Empire, was on the front lines of disputes with Demonkind. They knew more than anyone the menace vampires posed.

Furthermore, if Nagisa’s memory was correct, Kaleid Blood was the name of the most dangerous of all, of the *World’s Mightiest Vampires*—

Accordingly, it was small wonder that Justina assumed an attack stance, but—

“Ngh?!”

Suddenly, the long sword the female knight poised went flying from her hand as if swatted aside.

After a slight delay, the crack of a gunshot reverberated. Someone had sent Justina’s sword, and only her sword, flying off with accurate sniping from some removed location.

Nagisa and Kanon could only stare with bewilderment as Justina instantly drew a spare short sword from behind.

From behind them, the pair heard the throaty chorus of a high-class car engine and the tension-free voices of various girls.

“Oh, Hektooos!”

“It is time. If we do not return now—”

A crimson, open-top convertible pulled over and stopped at the curb of the intersection right next to Nagisa and Kanon.

Sitting in the driver’s seat was a foreign girl wearing an all-white dress. A girl wearing a pitch-black dress was standing up on the passenger side with an assault rifle raised. Somehow, both of the girls brimmed with class as if they were royalty. From the pair’s words, they seemed to have come to pick up Hektos.

Nodding as if she understood completely, the girl in the *yukata* walked forward. However, she immediately came to a halt. Then, she extended a hand, as if inviting Nagisa and Kanon both.

“Accompany me, Nagisa Akatsuki and priestess of the kingdom of the Valkyries. Kojou Akatsuki awaits thee.”

“Kojou...?”

Nagisa stared at Hektos in surprise. She did not know why Kojou’s name had come out of her mouth. But for some reason, she believed Hektos’s words. Mysteriously, Nagisa, who supposedly suffered from demonophobia, felt no fear from her specifically.

“Indeed. Together with thy truth—”

Staring at Nagisa, Hektos offered her a desolate smile.

Gripping her bags against her chest, Nagisa gazed into Kanon’s eyes in silence.

4

Asagi Aiba was getting off a bus at a stop on a desolate beach.

As the sea breeze whipped her hair around, she checked her smartphone’s map to confirm she had arrived at her destination.

She was heading toward an abandoned, rusted warehouse just ahead, the sort that felt like a place the mafia would be doing drug deals.

However, Asagi showed no particular sign of being afraid as she strode into the warehouse. She stopped just after entering the dimly lit building, surveying the area as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, when she heard a voice overhead.

“Lady Empress, so thou art hither—”

Asagi looked in the direction of the voice. Two girls sitting at the top of a steel stairway waved to Asagi as they competed in a smartphone game. They were wearing white sailor-themed dresses and school-mandated berets. The girls wore the uniforms of a renowned elementary school.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Tanker.”

Asagi waved toward the owner of the voice that had just addressed her.

One of the girls said, “’Tis nothing, ’tis nothing,” in a voice straight out of a period drama. This was the extremely skilled hacker bearing the alias of Tanker—Lydianne Didier.

“You are fourteen minutes late, Miss Asagi. It is not good to be fickle with time.”

The speaker had a tone reminiscent of a disgruntled kitten. She was a young girl with a rather adult face. Asagi had come to know the girl on Blue Elysium two months earlier—her name was Yume Eguchi.

Her sassiness hasn’t changed a bit, either, thought Asagi, smiling and taking the high road as she let it slide.

“That’s why I said sorry, geez. A high school girl is all kinds of busy, unlike you elementary school babies.”

“Is that so? That is most terrible. Makeup must take so long to apply—”

“Wh-who’s wearing makeup?! I’ll have you know my face is practically bare!” Asagi retorted.

Yume had blatantly and publicly declared that she would marry Kojou when she was older, and for that reason, she was oddly antagonistic toward Asagi. Truly, she regarded Asagi as her rival. Furthermore, Yume was quite a beautiful girl, which made Asagi unable to handle the matter with a particularly calm heart.

“...It’s not very mature to get ticked off at a kid, li’l miss.”

As if to tease Asagi for that fact, a synthetic voice, albeit oddly humanlike, coursed out from Asagi’s smartphone.

This was the avatar of the five supercomputers that controlled Itogami Island’s urban functions—the support AI dubbed Mogwai.

“Oh, shut up!” Asagi angrily shouted at her own smartphone.

“I am not a kid!” yelled Yume at virtually the same time.

Perhaps viewing Asagi's and Yume's anger as the sweet fruits of his labors, Mogwai let out a sardonic "*Keh-keh*" before falling silent. Asagi sighed and said, "Good grief," before stuffing her smartphone in her pocket.

"Well anyway... You two know each other, right?"

"Indeed. We're in the same club," Lydianne replied with pride.

The uniforms the two were wearing belonged to the elementary school of the highly reputable Tensou Academy, well-known within Itogami City. An all-girls school with the entire student body staying in the campus dorms struck Asagi as a troublesome environment, but from the looks of Yume and Lydianne, they were having a good, trouble-free life.

"Really? What club are you in? A period drama lover's society?" Asagi asked, a little surprised.

Why period dramas? Yume's narrowed brows said.

"A handicrafts club," Lydianne replied.

"Ah, somehow, that's incredibly...normal."

"More importantly, Lady Empress—"

Lydianne suddenly changed her tenor. Asagi nodded and pulled her smartphone out once more. The girls were not meeting at a shady abandoned warehouse to chitchat.

"Yes, yes, let's get down to business. Here's the posture control software and the visual analysis algorithm. Also, there were some glaring bugs in your company's preinstalled OS, so I'm sending you a patch to fix the bugs, too."

"...I have no words. I humbly accept your assistance."

Spreading out her notepad PC, Lydianne spoke formal words of thanks as she watched the file transfer.

The programs that Asagi had whipped up in one night were pieces of control software for next-generation industrial robots. Compared to the products currently in use, their capabilities were a couple of steps above the rest, and the resulting corporate profits would be in the tens of billions of yen at minimum. Asagi was trading that software to Lydianne's very own family's Didier Heavy

Industries for something of commensurate value.

“So the thing that I asked for?”

“It hath already been delivered.”

Speaking these words, Lydianne typed on her PC keyboard. After a moment, the *vrmm* of machinery booting up echoed from the back of the ostensibly empty warehouse.

With a mirage-like shimmer, a horde of Micro Robot Tanks, each about the size of a compact car, appeared from the darkness—at least thirty of them. Over half of the enormous warehouse was chock-full of military weapons resembling land turtles, built for urban warfare.

“Ritual spell camouflage, huh? Not bad.” Asagi smiled in satisfaction.

To have been concealed so well that even Asagi could not sense them when they were right before her eyes—she deeply understood the excellence of the tanks Lydianne had provided. Lydianne had something of a proud expression as she gazed at them.

“Unmanned Legged Tank Number Four, aka Hoemaru. Although the machines are one generation old, they have all been modernized and overhauled to perfection.”

“With all of this, I could take over Keystone Gate with one arm tied behind my back.”

“Were it against the Island Guard alone, you could with half this military strength and have room to spare. Naturally, ’twould be far more difficult against witches and vampire primogenitors.”

“That’s fine. I’ll manage somehow.”

Subconsciously toying with her smartphone, Asagi spoke those words with calm. She was saying, if the opponents were witches and primogenitors, she would defeat them if necessary, too.

“However, Lady Empress... Calling this level of land force together, and even Miss Yume, just what is it that you intendeth to bring about?”

“What am I—? Er, isn’t it obvious?”

Asagi blushed a little as she smiled, spreading both arms wide. What did you need three dozen robot tanks and the World's Mightiest Succubus for? It did not even require thought, for there was only one answer.

"War."

Asagi's voice reverberated through the warehouse on the beach.

From the smartphone in Asagi's hand, someone laughed sardonically.

"Keh-keh..."

5

Enshrouded by a dark mist, Velesh Aradahl stepped onto the ship's deck.

It belonged to a large cruise ship on the extreme end of the scale for personal ownership. The ship was named the *Oceanus Grave II*, owned by the Duke of Ardeal, Dimitrie Vattler.

"Vattler—!"

With a large voice backed by demonic energy, Aradahl called out this man's name. In his hand, he gripped an extravagant sealed scroll bearing the crest of a flying dragon and a tank. The sealed scroll, half crushed in his grip, amply reflected Aradahl's state of mind at the time.

"Come out, Vattler. I know you're here. Or would you prefer to sink to the bottom of the Pacific along with your ship?"

Aradahl's pronouncement was more than mere talk. The proof lay in the incredible demonic energy pulsing from his entire body. He possessed the power to sink a ship of that scale on his own; Aradahl's Beast Vassals were more potent still. If he carelessly unleashed the power of his Beast Vassals, the hull would be rent apart in a single blow.

And so—

Though unlikely to have been fearful of such an outcome, Vattler revealed himself surprisingly readily.

The handsome vampire wearing an all-white, three-piece suit did not employ

the power of transformation into mist; instead, he leisurely descended the stairs from the upper deck. Regarding Aradahl, who was shaking with rage, he seemed to be forcing back a smile.

“What’s the matter, Aradahl? This roughshod visit does not suit you.”

“Silence, Master of Serpents. State your intentions.”

Aradahl thrust forward the crushed scroll. Letters of invitation announcing Aradahl’s duel with Kojou Akatsuki were addressed to VIPs of various nations. By happenstance, Aradahl had learned of the letters’ existence, and thus he hurriedly made his way over, angrily shouting along the way.

“You don’t fancy them? For something made on such short notice, I think they turned out rather well.” Vattler’s voice rang out proudly, daring to provoke Aradahl even further.

The black-haired vampire’s expression twisted into anger. Unable to withstand the demonic energy flowing from Aradahl, the sealed cylinder ruptured.

“Don’t play games with me! How do you know of my duel with Kojou Akatsuki?”

“My... Which of us is playing games here, Aradahl?”

A slightly strained smile came over Vattler as he made that quiet statement. Aradahl felt a twinge of bewilderment.

“What?”

“You are not the only one who desires to fight Kojou Akatsuki. All this time, I have been looking forward to the day I fight him to the death, waiting on this island for him to mature,” Vattler lamented with an exaggerated, theatrical gesture.

Aradahl knew that his words were not wholly dishonest.

To immortal vampires, the time spent anticipating an unripe foe’s growth was no chore. And Vattler, who loved conflict more than anyone, was not one to shirk at any sacrifice if it meant being able to fight a powerful opponent.

Thus, he had remained in the Far East Demon Sanctuary a world away from

his homeland, waiting for the incomplete Fourth Primogenitor's rightful power to return. That was very much Vattler's way of doing things.

"And it is such precious prey that you are poaching from me. At the very least, I believe that grants me the right to observe your duel with Kojou up close... Am I mistaken?" Vattler smiled dangerously as he stared at Aradahl, who did not avert his eyes.

"I am not dueling Kojou Akatsuki for my own amusement. The duel is nothing more than a means to seize the Dragon of the Swamp currently under his protection."

"It is the same thing, Aradahl—the very same thing." An antagonistic air hovered as Vattler slowly shook his head. "For the chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire to duel the Fourth Primogenitor makes this a *de facto* international conflict. I am not saying that the repercussions will reverberate throughout the world, but I believe it surely should be conducted in public, under the eyes of those who should rightfully attend. I must consider the national welfare of the Empire, after all."

"To think the words *national welfare* would come out of your mouth. What a foul joke," Aradahl spat. "In the first place, it was one of *your* confidants that lent his aid to the Dragon of the Swamp's escape, Vattler— If not for Kira Lebedev, Kojou Akatsuki would have never intervened in this affair."

"I am terribly dismayed there was a misunderstanding, Aradahl, but at that point in time, my men and I had not been informed of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization's view that the Dragon of the Swamp should be disposed of. I believe that the fault where that point is concerned...rests with you."

Vattler, in contrast to his usual grandiloquence, remained calm. Aradahl scowled.

"If I had ordered you to capture the Dragon of the Swamp, I do not think it would have ended with simply this."

"That is not true. During this last half year, I have attempted to be quite prudent by my standards."

"You have a lot of nerve saying that after spreading these ridiculous letters of

invitation around.”

“It was a golden opportunity, and I thought I’d be generous for an old friend. Ah, it would seem my guest has just arrived.”

“What...?”

When Vattler looked behind him, Aradahl’s gaze followed suit. Appearing just then, with a Japanese girl appearing to be an agent of the Lion King Agency attending her, was a beautiful woman with long silver hair, resembling foreign royalty.

She had pale skin and blue eyes reminiscent of a pristine glacier. On her beautiful face, extolled as the Second Coming of Freya herself, a teasing smile appeared.

“I pray you are in good spirits, Your Excellency, Chairman Aradahl. I am grateful that you have invited me to Japan.”

Grasping the short skirt that went with her military ceremonial outfit, she bowed in grand fashion. Thanks to the environment she was raised in from birth and the royal blood that coursed through her veins, her conduct left no openings whatsoever.

“Princess La Folia Rihavein...?” Aradahl said, recovering from his initial surprise.

La Folia Rihavein was the crown princess of the kingdom of Aldegia. She had passionate fans not just in her own nation of Aldegia in northern Europe, but all around the world.

She breathed elegance, and she was widely praised for her deep prudence and benevolence in matters of policy. Only a tiny fraction of her political opponents knew the deeper truth: She was a shrewd, iron-willed businesswoman.

“Why are you...?”

La Folia replied to Aradahl’s question with a grin.

“Kojou is a gentleman destined to be my future partner. It is only natural that I watch his duel to its conclusion. Of course, Your Excellency, I pray for your

good fortune in battle as well. Please be gentle with him.”

“Surely you jest, Princess.” Aradah! grimaced at La Folia’s statement, uncertain whether it was a joke or meant seriously.

A highly regimented man such as Aradah! found slippery opponents like La Folia to be rather difficult to deal with. Fundamentally, she was cut from the same cloth as Vattler. If he had to put his finger on it, she was a hard, logical realist, the type that was not picky about choosing the means by which to achieve her ends.

“It would seem that, aside from myself, the attendees are surprisingly numerous. Yes, from the Five Dynasties, even people from the Confederate States of America—”

“People from Holy Ground Treaty non-signatory nations...?”

The words La Folia had so nonchalantly stated wiped Aradah!’s expression from his face. He did not want to show the girl in front of him that he was unnerved.

The Holy Ground Treaty enshrined peaceful coexistence between humankind and Demonkind, but by no means had every nation ratified it. For various historical and religious reasons, or simple territorial disputes, many nations considered demons enemies even to the present day.

Representatives of such Holy Ground Treaty non-signatory nations had been invited to the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island. Aradah! could not read Vattler’s true intent in doing so.

“Vattler...what the hell are you thinking?”

“I want as many people as possible to witness your duel.” Vattler was invigorated. His eyes fell to an analog watch on his left wrist. “Furthermore, the betting odds currently have you at six to four, far more competitive than one would think. That’s the fame of the Fourth Primogenitor title for you.”

“Damn you, you’re running a betting ring for our duel?” Aradah! growled, his anger plain.

Having made a spectacle of Aradah! and Kojou’s duel all on his own, Vattler

intended to use gambling to make a profit from it as well.

For the Fourth Primogenitor to duel the chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire meant a deadly duel between fellow demons. Naturally, the non-signatories to the Holy Ground Treaty would gladly come and enjoy the show.

"I expect a beautiful show, Aradah! Well, I'm sure you of all people would never put on a pathetic display."

"My apologies, but it will not be the delightful battle you expect, Vattler." Barely managing to suppress his emotions, Aradah! spoke in a low voice. "The duel will be over in an instant. I have already gauged Kojou Akatsuki's might. He is not qualified to call himself the Fourth Primogenitor. It is because you know this full well that you have not laid a hand upon him, yes?"

"Heh-heh... Good for you, Aradah! I'm sure your words will have a large impact on the betting odds."

Showing no sign of remorse, Vattler offered a cheerful smile. By that point, Aradah! was too angry for words.

Watching this with obvious amusement, La Folia posed a question in a soft voice.

"Then, Your Excellency, would you allow me to place a wager as well?"

"Are you saying that you will bet on Kojou Akatsuki's victory, Princess?"

Aradah! turned a sharp look La Folia's way. The silver-haired princess made a lovely smile.

"Yes. Should he win, Your Excellency, there is a wish I would like you to grant."

"A wish, you say?"

La Folia nodded. "I wish for you to withdraw the words you have just spoken in a public forum, Your Excellency. In other words, recognize Kojou as a proper primogenitor and invite him to the Garden of Whispers—that is what I desire."

Aradah! carefully chose his words as he replied, "That is... Though it may be your wish, those are not terms I can easily accept." The Fourth Primogenitor

was not acknowledged to actually exist. It was the offsetting by the mutual rivalries of the three Dominions ruled by the three primogenitors that upheld the global military balance.

The emergence of a fourth primogenitor would easily cause that balance to crumble. The Fourth Primogenitor was a dangerous being, its very existence potentially the trigger for a great conflict.

“That is why I have proposed a wager.” La Folia giggled as she continued to smile.

“Then, should I be victorious over Kojou Akatsuki, you would need to pay compensation of commensurate value with that wish.” Aradahl grinned, slightly teasing her.

However, the princess’s expression remained unchanged.

“Yes. I understand that, of course.”

“Then what do you intend to wager?”

“My chastity.”

“Wait a— Princess...?!”

The eyes of the Attack Mage guarding the princess opened so wide that they seemed likely to pop out. It was a girl with a ponytail wearing a black instrument case on her back.

“That’s insane... You would offer me the Blood Memory of the Royal Family of Aldegia? To a vampire of the Warlord’s Empire?”

Aradahl was just as shocked. At present, relations were peaceful, but Aldegia and the Warlord’s Empire, sharing a border, had been in regular and repeated conflicts. It was a princess of that very Aldegia who had stated she would offer Aradahl her royal blood. That was virtually the same as wagering the nation itself.

“I believe I have already stated that Kojou is destined to be my partner. I have no misgivings whatsoever to entrust my own fate to his victory.”

La Folia shook her head without hesitation. Aradahl exhaled briefly. It was a hearty sigh at the incredible gall with which the young princess was so calmly

wagering her own nation's future.

However, the girl was forgetting that, in the end, the only ones standing at the place of the duel were Aradahl and Kojou Akatsuki. Furthermore, there was nothing that could make Kojou Akatsuki victorious over Aradahl.

“You have made...a foolish decision.”

“May I take your words as acceptance of our wager?”

“Yes, I accept.”

Looking back at the princess, willful to the bitter end, Aradahl felt a slight twinge of pity.

La Folia was likely in love with Kojou Akatsuki. Thanks to that, she innocently believed his victory was assured; that was a fatal miscalculation. Aradahl, of course, bore no duty to take her consideration for Kojou Akatsuki into account.

“I shall eagerly anticipate the outcome of the battle, Your Excellency. May your exploits be bold.”

The silver-haired princess bowed once more with a dancer's grace.

Aradahl watched in silence as she departed, the Attack Mage following close behind.

Vattler wore a devilish grin all the while.

6

It was dusk when Kojou and Yukina arrived at the agreed-upon breakwater, right before sunset.

They'd traveled the island end to end right up to the last possible minute, searching for a way to win against Aradahl. Though they sought the aid of Nina Adelard, the self-titled Great Alchemist of Yore, and Kensei Kanase, former court sorcerous engineer of Aldegia, neither knew of methods to control Beast Vassals, inherently outside their specialties, so they had failed to learn anything, save how frightening Aradahl was. As a result, Kojou was facing the duel without any effective countermeasure prepared. And then—

“...”

Just when they arrived at the breakwater at dusk, Kojou and Yukina stopped in bewilderment.

Seaward from the tip of Island North, a concrete structure stretched forth. There was a container terminal for freighters next to it.

The breakwater was conspicuously dreary, with nothing but a large-scale gantry crane and piles of containers to be seen, which made the extravagant ship coming in seem particularly out of place.

The beautiful hull was ornamented with colored streamers and the flags of numerous nations, lit up by countless LED lights. Banners hanging down from the deck flapped in the wind, reading A DUEL. REJOICE!, BATTLE FOR THE AGES, KOJOU AKATSUKI VS VELESH ARADAH and other wholly irresponsible pieces of text.

“What the hell is this...?!”

“*Oceanus Grave II*... Why is the Duke of Ardeal’s ship here...?”

The stagecraft far gaudier than their wildest expectations left Kojou and Yukina rooted to the spot in shock.

Of course, Aradah had surely desired no such thing. Kojou didn’t think a hard-ass like him would be happy with a stupid uproar like this. The odds that, just like those letters of invitation, this was the work of Vattler were particularly heavy.

What is he pulling all this for? thought Kojou in confusion, gazing at the deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*, when he suddenly realized why. On the deck of that extravagant ship was a slew of unfamiliar guests.

Their numbers had to be two—maybe three hundred in total. Their species and gender differed, but the sight of foreigners in oddly lavish clothing stood out to Kojou. The sight of them with stout bodyguards on both flanks, binoculars in one hand, made them look like royalty invited to watch a horse race.

“Vattler... Don’t tell me you...”

That bastard. Kojou gnashed his teeth. The guest passengers on the *Oceanus*

Grave II were no doubt there at Vattler's invitation, assembled from every corner of the globe to witness Kojou and Aradahl's lethal combat. He and Kojou had been completely turned into showpieces.

His faint hope of resolving the matter through dialogue vanished then and there.

Given Aradahl's position, there was no longer any prospect of him responding to Kojou's attempts to negotiate. If he abandoned his duel with Kojou, he would be scorned for his timidity by the enormous gallery that had assembled.

If he wanted to rescue Glenda, emerging victorious from the duel looked to be his only option. If Vattler's desire was to ensure that Kojou and Aradahl fought, he had succeeded in his objective with flying colors.

"Fourth Primogenitor darling..."

As if to further fan the flames of Kojou's anger toward Vattler, someone called out to him out of the blue. The speaker was standing on the gangway of the *Oceanus Grave II*. With a wave, she called "Over here!" to Kojou and Yukina.

The girl was wearing a red outfit that resembled a swimsuit. She opened a large parasol that looked like it was meant for a ring girl as she rushed over to Kojou's side. She was one of the five Oceanus Girls, the blond beauty named Vika.

"It has been quite some time, Fourth Primogenitor. Please, come with me. All the guests are waiting."

She took one of Kojou's arms in both of her own and led him aboard the *Oceanus Grave II*.

"Guests?" he asked, confused. "Who are you talking about?"

Vika pressed her ample bust against Kojou's upper arm. Watching this, Yukina's eyes immediately went cold.

"Wait a sec; what are the Oceanus Girls doing here anyway? And uh, what's with that outfit?"

"Well, I'm a ring girl, you see!" she said with a bright smile.

"Ring girl?"

“For duels and any combat, you need to have beautiful, exquisite women nearby, don’t you? I mean, this is like a worldwide-wrestling-title match. Does this outfit please you...?”

“Er, pleased or not, it’s not like I came for a wrestling match, you know...”

“It is practically the same thing. The whole world is watching.”

Craaap, thought Kojou, shoulders sinking. No matter how hard he tried, he didn’t feel like she was registering anything he said. Giving up on further attempts to resist, he politely let the girl lead him along.

The beautiful blond woman led Kojou and Yukina to a lounge bar inside the ship. It was a spacious room furnished with lavish seats, with a player piano providing pleasant, relaxing music in the background.

“Kojou Akatsuki!”

Without warning, someone called out his name, intruding upon the elegance of the room.

Violently kicking a table aside as she approached was a highly stylish girl with a ponytail—Sayaka Kirasaka, who they had parted ways with back at the Lion King Agency branch office. There was no give in the eyes with which she glared at Kojou. They made him feel well and truly backed into a corner.

“Er, Kirasaka? I thought you were on a mission for the Lion King Agen...?”

“I am!! I’m here as Princess La Folia’s bodyguard!”

“La Folia...? Wait, even *she’s* here...?”

Kojou subconsciously brought his palm to his face. The scheming princess of the kingdom of Aldegia was a difficult person for Kojou to deal with. She was probably one of Vattler’s cordially invited guests.

It seemed that Sayaka had been given the mission of guarding that very same princess. Since the princess coming to Itogami Island had not been publicly divulged, it was doubtlessly a top secret mission. Although, Sayaka had likely never imagined that the princess was coming to spectate Kojou’s duel.

“More importantly, you met Prince Iblisveil, right?!” Sayaka nervously prodded.

“Y-yeah,” he said with a nod.

Well, kind of.

He certainly had met the prince of the Fallen Dynasty and had even been treated to noodles in the process.

“Victory—you actually have a chance at victory, right?!”

“Er, that’s... I don’t have a clue what to make of what he told me.”

“Whaaaat?!”

Blowing up into a rage all on her own, Sayaka began forcefully wringing Kojou’s neck. Kojou gasped for breath.

“What are you all ticked off for?!”

“Shut up; I’m not ticked off, idiot! Because of you, the princess... The princess’s chastity...”

“Huh? Her chastity...?”

Kojou was thrown into even further chaos. As far as he knew, he hadn’t done a single thing to La Folia. In the first place, he hadn’t known until that very moment in time that she had come to the island to begin with.

“I made a wager with Chairman Aradahl. A wager on whether he or Kojou would be triumphant—”

Gazing with amusement at how Kojou was lost at sea, La Folia herself replied. Surprised, Kojou looked at the princess, reunited with her after quite some time.

“Wager...? La Folia, what did you do...?”

“Chairman Aradahl forced me into a corner, so I...offered my chastity. It took all of my efforts to make him agree to the terms should he lose to Kojou. And if Kojou should lose, Chairman Aradahl may do with my body as he pleases.”

Sullenly casting her eyes downward as she told the tale, La Folia immediately lifted her face, a fleeting smile coming over it as if trying to say *Don’t worry about me*. Anyone not familiar with La Folia’s true nature would surely have their hearts stolen by her heroism, a hundred times out of a hundred.

However, in contrast, Kojou's wariness was plain to see as he drew his face close to Sayaka, still right beside him.

"...How much of what she's saying is true?"

"Aside from the part at the end, she's not telling the whole truth. The princess is the one who made the bet to begin with."

"...Wait, then the betting part is for real? By offering her own chastity, she means—"

"This problem doesn't only concern you, Princess. A small nation like the kingdom of Aldegia on the front lines of international conflict is able to resist the Warlord's Empire because the priestess power in the royal family is so strong..."

"Yeah... The spiritual engines and the pseudo-Holy Swords..."

Kojou had witnessed the knights of Aldegia, including La Folia herself, using swords shrouded in divine essence several times over. The pseudo-Holy Swords were able to inflict fatal damage on demons, making them powerful weapons rivaling the divine armaments of the Lion King Agency.

"But if Chairman Aradahl obtains the Royal Family of Aldegia's Blood Memory, it will become possible for the Warlord's Empire to manufacture spiritual engines, too. Right now, things are calm without territorial conflicts, but the next time a war starts up, worst case, the entire kingdom might be destroyed —"

"I wagered," La Folia interrupted, "because I believe in Kojou's victory. If you win, there is no problem whatsoever." Her declaration was firm.

The sheer weight of her baseless faith in him overwhelmed Kojou.

"Wait, isn't this weird?! Why'd you go raising the stakes behind my back anyway?!"

"Please, be at ease. Now that my body has become the potential spoils of the victor, obtaining victory is the same as obtaining the rights to it."

"But even if you say that to me, there's no guarantee I'm going to win against —"

“In the name of La Folia Rihavein, I command thee— Win, Kojou.”

As her blue eyes stared straight into Kojou’s own, La Folia spoke with a tone that permitted no argument. The majestic solemnity she was giving off left Kojou at a complete loss for words.

La Folia proceeded to undo her own necktie and unbutton her shirt. Her slender neck and ample cleavage gradually became exposed.

Then, she provocatively gazed at Kojou with upturned eyes.

“Do this, and my body shall be yours. Or are you unsatisfied with me?”

“Like I was saying, that’s not... Wait, why are you stripping?!”

“Princess, please, exercise prudence! Princess!! We’re leaving now!!”

Quickly wedging herself into the conversation, Sayaka desperately worked to put La Folia’s clothes back in order. If anyone was to see them like this, an international incident would be unavoidable, something Sayaka was desperately working to avert.

For her part, a deeply suggestive smile came over La Folia as she narrowed her eyes.

“It will be all right. The blessing of the Valkyries is with you.”

“Y-yeah...” Kojou nodded without really understanding why. La Folia saw this for herself as Sayaka ended up dragging her out of the lounge. She didn’t neglect to blow a kiss his way at the very end. The sense of tension from just earlier had been thoroughly and utterly shattered.

When the girls were no longer in view, Kojou put both hands on the nearest table and limply exhaled. He felt like his endurance had been heavily depleted before the duel had even begun. He even felt doubtful as to whether La Folia had been trying to ensure his victory. And then...

“—To be ogling girls at a time like this, you must be very confident in your chances, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Right before that frail Kojou’s eyes, two small-statured figures appeared as the air rippled without warning.

It was Natsuki Minamiya, wearing a frilly black dress, and Glenda, wearing a white one. They looked very much like a witch and a princess from some kind of fairy tale.

“Natsuki and...Glenda? What are you doing in those outfits?”

“This girl is the spoils of the duel. Dressing her up to a fair extent is a necessity.”

Natsuki lifted her chin with pride. She must have been the one to put Glenda in that outfit. As for Glenda herself, she seemed unable to calm down in the unfamiliar dress.

Though, it couldn't have been only the outfit making Glenda better behaved than usual. Yui and Shio having been taken hostage was no doubt weighing heavily on her mind.

“From that face, it seems your doubts have not been dispelled.”

Seeing the clouded look on Kojou's face, Natsuki posed the question as if to tease him.

“Like I was gonna find a way to win with only half a day to prepare.”

“Your words are quite amusing. You are the World's Mightiest Vampire, are you not?”

“Right now, being called that just sounds like sarcasm.”

Natsuki shook her head, exasperated and disappointed at his throwaway answer.

“Kojou...”

Seeing Kojou look so defeated, Glenda called out to him in a troubled voice. Kojou gently stroked her cheek to comfort her.

“I get it. Don't worry. I'll manage somehow.”

“Dah...!”

Finding relief in Kojou's defiant, smiling face, Glenda nodded as if by reflex.

“We are heading to the deck. The Master of Serpents is waiting, after all—”

Natsuki opened a teleport gate in midair. Taking Glenda with her into the gate, Natsuki glanced back, her black hair fluttering in the moment just before they vanished.

“Do not be led astray, Kojou Akatsuki... You are not alone.”

“...Huh?”

Before he could ask what she meant, Natsuki vanished from sight. The gentle words, so unlike Natsuki, made Kojou even more uneasy than before.

“What are you going to do, senpai?”

Seeing a rather delicate expression come over Kojou, Yukina looked up at him with a questioning air. Thanks to Natsuki and Glenda’s departure, she and Kojou were the only ones left in the lounge. Even the self-styled ring girl who’d led them there had vanished at some point. Perhaps she thought that was a wise thing to do.

“Nah... I’m just... To think the day would come when *Natsuki* tried to make me feel better...”

When he said that, Kojou’s head seemed to split wide open.

“You are not alone,” she had said. From the subtext, her meaning was surely *We are here with you*. It was like some trendy line from the lyrics of a song in a commercial.

“I suppose it means the situation is that dire,” Yukina said, dead serious. Kojou was not the only one left uneasy by Natsuki’s demeanor.

“Well, I’ve had you and others always helping me out up to this point, Himeragi. Kind of late to say this, but...thanks for everything.”

Forcing away a blush, Kojou stared straight at Yukina with earnest eyes.

“Wh-what are you...all of a sudden...?!”

“Although, a lot of times, I did think it was depressing to have you glued to me all the time...”

“D...depressing...?!”

“Sorry, but if something happens to me, please take care of Glenda. Also, find

something good to say to Nagisa, would ya? Like, I had to travel far away, or I drowned at sea, something appropriate.”

“—You mustn’t!”

With a sharp voice, Yukina interrupted Kojou’s words. They sounded like a last request. The unexpectedly strong rejection made Kojou nervous. He didn’t understand why Yukina was suddenly angry.

“H-Himeragi?”

“Senpai, you have to make it back. Glenda, La Folia, Yui, and Shio cannot be saved without you, senpai!”

Yukina’s fingers grabbed hold of Kojou’s collar. Her pupils, so close to him that he felt overwhelmed, reflected his face.

“Uh, I understand that, but...”

“Do you intend to abandon me as well?”

As Kojou attempted to talk his way out the situation, Yukina thrust her left hand right before his eyes. The silver ring on her left ring finger was emitting a faint glow.

“You made me your partner, so please, take responsibility. Senpai, you absolutely must come back. You must come back to me—,” Yukina insisted in a most delicate voice. From the sight of her, Kojou finally realized it. Yukina had been holding her feelings inside all that time.

She had to be quietly suffering from her worries about sending Kojou off to a duel all by himself—and her own powerlessness in being unable to give him a plan for victory. Yukina had desperately concealed her anguish during the time Kojou had walked all across the island in search of advice that could help him win. She did this so that her own unease might not infect Kojou as well.

“Freebie...”

As he grasped Yukina’s trembling hand, Kojou gave her a laid-back smile.

“Yes?”

Eyes wide, Yukina blinked. That Yukina could not conceal her own worries was

because, having come that far, Kojou's own apprehension had made her air them out loud. *Now it's my turn*, he thought. It was exactly the juncture where he ought to bluff to ease Yukina's worries a little bit.

"If I come back safe and sound, I at least want one good freebie out of you, Himeragi."

Kojou brought his lips close to Yukina's ear, whispering. Her shoulders trembled as if she had been tickled. "Goodness," she uttered with a sigh. Bathed in the rays of the evening sun through the ship's windows, her cheeks were dyed thoroughly red.

"Understood. Please do whatever you like."

Yukina spoke in a somewhat blunt voice. However, she made no move to shake off Kojou's hand. Her cheeks still red, she snuggled close to Kojou, staring out the window.

The surface of the sunset sea grew darker, like a blot of ink widening over it. Only the water's horizon glistened red like fire. The sky's scarlet gradient resembled the color of fresh blood. Night would fall at any moment.

"Sunset, it would seem."

She was quiet.

Kojou nodded. "Yeah. Guess I'd better go—" His voice lacked fighting spirit. "Just like goin' out for a stroll."

Yukina looked up at him and nodded. Then the pair began to walk out together. It was unclear who had started walking first.

It was twilight—the witching hour. The time of demons had come.

7

A sea breeze was passing through. Aradahl was already standing on top of the breakwater. He was alone, upholding his end of the bargain for a one-on-one match.

Seeing this, Kojou stepped down onto the breakwater as well. Even as a

worried look came over Yukina, she remained atop the gangway.

“So you’ve come, Kojou Akatsuki.”

With the sleeves of his black coat flapping in the wind, Aradahl murmured in a solemn tone.

Somehow, he looked annoyed, likely due to the spectators gathered on Vattler’s ship. Even he hadn’t anticipated that his proposal for a duel would turn them into an exotic sideshow like this.

“It would seem that you have brought the Dragon of the Swamp as promised.”

Aradahl looked at the topside of the *Oceanus Grave II* as he spoke.

In her white dress, Glenda was standing in the most visible spot at the center of the deck. Because she was a precious, young dragon, the eyes of the crowd were upon her, but no one approached her. They were fearful of Natsuki, standing right at Glenda’s side.

“The two hostages?”

Kojou asked as he similarly surveyed the topside of the ship. He could not see Yuiri and Shio anywhere on the main deck.

“Surely it is not the girls’ desire to be exposed to prying eyes. I have placed them with the princesses in Vattler’s custody. If you doubt me, I do not mind should you wish to confirm for yourself.”

“Nah,” Kojou said, shaking his head at the black-haired vampire’s reply. He didn’t think Aradahl would lie about that. Either way, unless and until Kojou defeated him, he could not rescue Yuiri or Shio.

“Looks like you’re not much of a fan of this dumb spectator event, either.”

“Things were blown out of proportion thanks to my kinsman’s foolishness. I apologize in that regard.” Aradahl’s brow creased in visible anguish.

“If you’re gonna apologize about that, I’d be grateful if you just gave up on Glenda for good, y’know...,” Kojou offered hopefully.

Aradahl shook his head with a neutral expression. “That I cannot do. Though,

if you claim you will dispose of that dragon in my stead, it would be another matter.”

“If I was gonna do that, I wouldn’t be doing something as embarrassing as having a formal duel in the first place.” Kojou sighed. He had resigned himself to the fact that the fight with Aradahl was inevitable. “Come to think of it, where’s Vattler? You didn’t make him your second?”

“For me, the risk posed by having that fool stand as my witness would be far too great.”

Aradahl spat out his words as if he’d crushed a bitter bug between his teeth. Kojou nearly broke into a laugh, but it seemed Aradahl had not in any way meant that as a joke.

“But thanks to him, no time has been squandered calling over other witnesses. The prince of the Fallen Dynasty, the princess of Aldegia—surely you are not dissatisfied to have them see this through.”

“Well, I suppose not.”

Kojou politely acknowledged his words. He didn’t think Aradahl would pull any kind of underhanded trick to begin with. He was more worried about what suspicious actions Vattler might pull. However, even that man would probably have to behave while under the public’s eye.

Only one problem remained: whether Kojou could win against Aradahl. In the end, it all came down to that.

“What about the signal to start the duel? Is someone gonna ring a gong or something?” Kojou asked calmly.

His whole body was tense, as if brimming with static electricity. It reminded him of how he felt before a game back when he was in the basketball club. This was a kind of anxiety Kojou hadn’t felt in quite some time. But this was no sporting event. There was no room amid the tension to be enjoying things: Glenda, Yui, Shio, and Kojou himself all had their destinies on the line.

“I will leave that to you. Launch any attack you wish,” replied Aradahl.

At a glance, he appeared to be wide open. No doubt it was intended less a

display of composure than a concession for having requested the duel in the first place. He was an uptight vampire to the bitter end.

That said, Kojou was under no obligation to follow suit.

“Oh, you’re sooo considerate. I’m grateful. I’ll go with this, then.”

Kojou wore a sinister grin as he retrieved a single coin from his pocket. He waited for Aradahl to nod, flicking it high into the air with his thumb.

Anyone who’d ever seen a country western film knew the drill: You drew your gun the instant the flicked coin fell to the ground. Aradahl surely intended to do just that.

But Kojou had no recollection of saying the duel began when the coin hit the ground—

Just before the coin, dancing in the sky, reached its zenith, Kojou vanished from Aradahl’s field of view. Even if the opponent didn’t completely lose sight of him, his reaction speed had definitely dulled. Not letting that instant go to waste, Kojou kicked off from the ground.

Aradahl noticed Kojou’s motion, but it was too late. Kojou, his center of balance low, had already crept into his flank.

“?!”

The dark-haired vampire looked alarmed. That was because no demonic energy was flowing from Kojou’s body. That was why Aradahl, on guard against the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, reacted late to that one move.

“Gu...oah...!”

Wide open from shock, Aradahl’s pupils wavered, appearing to have lost their focus. The swing of Kojou’s powerhouse left hook had apparently grazed the tip of Aradahl’s chin.

If he couldn’t defeat Aradahl with a Beast Vassal, then he just needed to not use a Beast Vassal—after much hesitation, this was the conclusion Kojou had reached. Vampires had such vast amounts of demonic energy that attacks not reliant upon that energy were a blind spot in fights between one another. Immortal body or not, if you shook a vampire’s brain enough, it would surely

take a suitable amount of time to recover. At the very least, enough time to create a momentary opportunity for another attack—

“—C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Two, Cor-Tauri Succinum!”

With Aradahl’s movements halted, Kojou unleashed a Beast Vassal right at him. However, the attack was not unleashed on the surface, but beneath it. The Fourth Primogenitor’s second Beast Vassal was a minotaur with a body of magma. Its attack became an incandescent stake, stabbing up from under Itogami Island’s artificial earth to completely envelop Aradahl.

The torrent of magma erupting like a spire mercilessly rent the vast breakwater asunder, changing the very landscape. “Ohhh!” stirred the spectators of the *Oceanus Grave II* in a show of praise.

Feeling like sports spectators, several had made their armed escorts carry cameras, turning them into commemorative photographers for the occasion. It was like they were confusing the destruction wrought by Kojou’s Beast Vassal with some kind of great natural spectacle.

Naturally, Kojou had no time for such enjoyment. He grimaced as he searched for Aradahl’s whereabouts from within the hot, glimmering magma flying apart.

The terms of the duel were to fight until the opponent was rendered incapable of combat. Naturally, he’d lose sleep if his opponent died. Kojou also didn’t really bear any ill will toward Aradahl. If he could cool and harden the magma, trapping Aradahl inside, that would be best for Kojou’s peace of mind. But—

“I guess things aren’t gonna be that easy, huh...!”

Kojou’s cheeks twisted in unease. The stake of magma rent apart, and appearing from within a shimmer was a vampire silhouette shrouded by a vortex of demonic energy.

“What has it been, centuries...? It has been so long since I have been robbed of consciousness for even a second...”

A low voice devoid of emotion echoed amid the burning wind. The exceptionally clinical tone of voice made Kojou shudder as he felt a chill.

Finally, Aradahl revealed himself, his entire body clad in pitch-black armor.

Formed of countless, sharp-edged blades, it was a huge suit of full plate armor. The silhouette made Aradahl look like some evil ogre, as if his very body had been transformed into a monster made of steel.

“Armor...?! No... You’re wearing your own Beast Vassal?!” Kojou exclaimed as he realized the true nature of the pitch-black armor.

It was just like Astarte’s Rhododactylos, a symbiotic type of Beast Vassal that fused with its host. Encasing his entire body in that Beast Vassal was how Aradahl was able to endure the magma that could burn even a vampire’s body to ashes.

“Using a coin to divert my line of sight... A surprise attack employing flesh and blood rather than demonic energy... Then an attack from the blind spot beneath my feet. First, allow me to say that your strategy was splendid. I acknowledge that I underestimated you.”

Still equipping his armor, Aradahl summoned a new Beast Vassal, Ghoula, the black short swords he summoned during their last encounter.

Kojou gawked at the sheer number of them. There were hundreds—no—thousands, perhaps. The pitch-black Beast Vassal horde was large enough to blot out the entire twilight sky. Like starving piranhas, the swarm of Intelligent Weapons turned the tips of their blades toward Kojou as one.

“Accordingly, I shall defeat you with all my power, Kojou Akatsuki. Farewell.”

There was no time to form a plan.

Kojou’s entire body, impaled by the blades, was helplessly sent flying.



CHAPTER THREE
ALRESCHA GLACIES

CHAPTER THREE

ALRESCHA GLACIES

1

The artificial earth trembled.

Scattered concrete fragments poured down onto the sea's surface like rain. The sun's afterglow dyed the hovering cloud of dust red. The horde of over a thousand Intelligent Weapons unleashed by Aradahl charged over and over, blotting out Kojou completely.

Yukina and the others gazed at that ghastly spectacle from a lifeboat on the deck of an extravagant ship.

“—Oh my, a scathing attack from Chairman Aradahl. The Fourth Primogenitor has been sent flying—!”

The beautiful blond in a ring-girl outfit was doing live commentary from the center of the deck. Listening to her announcements, the guests aboard the ship let out a stir of admiration. Even they had rarely seen such relentless combat between vampires.

The artificial isle's construction materials were laid bare from ceaseless Beast Vassal attacks tearing up the ground in all directions.

Kojou just barely managed to endure Aradahl's ferocious assault. To fend off the pitch-black short swords, he had deployed a bulwark in front of him that appeared to be made of diamond.

However, Kojou had no room to counterattack. His entire body was riddled with lacerations, and a mist of fresh blood sprayed into the air. The concrete fragments sent scattering about by Aradahl's attack were surely what had wounded Kojou much like shrapnel. The amount of blood lost was slight, but

Kojou's face was twisted in agony and nervousness.

"Sen...pai..."

Staring at Kojou wounded all over, Yukina clasped both hands as if in prayer.

Standing at Yukina's side was Natsuki, her lace-rimmed fan spread wide. Sitting in a chair placed in front of the girls, Glenda was cringing in visible fear.

The reason for other guests on the deck to send inquisitive gazes in her direction was likely because they knew Glenda was the prize of the duel. But Yukina realized that there was a whiff of bewilderment mixed with those gazes.

So they truly did not know the real reason Aradahl was after Glenda either—

"What are you doing, Kojou Akatsuki?! Get it together already...!"

In contrast, in a place largely removed from Yukina and company, Sayaka was raising a loud voice. She was leaning over the deck's handrail, quite worked up as she waved around the sword in her hand.

Gazing rather coolly from behind her was La Folia.

"Please sit, Sayaka. You are interfering with the other guests' ability to watch the duel."

"But, Princess... At this rate, if Kojou loses..."

A conflicted look came over Sayaka as La Folia scolded her with a smile. It was La Folia herself whose destiny had been wagered on the outcome of the duel.

However, in contrast to Sayaka's inability to settle down, the princess's elegant smile did not falter.

"It is not a problem. And the battle has finally become quite thrilling, has it not?"

"Thrilling or not, this is nothing but Kojou Akatsuki getting thrashed, isn't it —?!"

"Is it, now—?"

La Folia made a suggestive shake of her head. The very next instant, Kojou, supposedly backed into a corner, suddenly launched a counterattack. What appeared in midair, contorting the atmosphere like a mirage, was a bicorn, its

entire body shrouded in raging winds. Its roar became a destructive shock wave that indiscriminately mowed the surface of the ground.

“Here, the Fourth Primogenitor summons a new Beast Vassal. This is incredible; what amazing power—!”

The announcer’s tension became more heated all at once. The guests on the ship’s topside also looked on in surprise at the destructiveness of Kojou’s Beast Vassal. The shock wave made the surface of the sea choppy, shaking even the purportedly barrier-protected hull of the *Oceanus Grave II*.

“—No, that won’t do.”

Natsuki spoke in a voice bereft of emotion. Yukina turned to her in surprise.

“Ms. Minamiya...?”

“It is impressive to the eye, but that’s merely the demolition of the artificial isle. No matter how much demonic energy is scattered about, no indiscriminate flailing will defeat the likes of Aradahl. He is wasting his Beast Vassals.”

“...”

Natsuki’s words, delivered with such indifference, prompted Yukina to bite her lip in silence. If unleashed without limit, the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor possessed the power to wipe Itogami Island itself off the map. Certainly, Aradahl was a powerful vampire, but she didn’t think he outstripped a true primogenitor in total demonic-energy capacity. Perhaps he could be pushed back through raw force—but Yukina’s fleeting hope was erased by the announcer girl’s voice.

“After coming this far, Chairman Aradahl counterattacks once more! The Fourth Primogenitor is in a daze!! In the face of the chairman’s fierce attack, the Fourth Primogenitor—endures! He endures! He endures! What defensive power! So this is the World’s Mightiest Vampire’s true specialty...or is it?!”

Clad in the dark armor, Aradahl threaded his way through a gap in the shock wave spat out by the bicorn. Kojou, his vision clouded by gray-colored dust, did not realize this.

As Aradahl raced like the gale, his right hand gripped one of the dark short

swords. Personally poisoning the Intelligent Weapon he had summoned, Aradahl sliced at Kojou. With control of his Beast Vassal taking up all his concentration, Kojou had no chance of evading the attack!

“To think that Chairman Aradahl would launch a direct assault! Is this payback for getting punched at the start of the match?! The Fourth Primogenitor’s severed right arm dances in the sky!”

Snatching his own severed arm out of midair, Kojou retreated. Perhaps because his vampiric powers were so active, when he reattached his right arm, it healed in the blink of an eye. Nevertheless, the mental reeling and the depletion of his endurance had not been restored along with it. An unmistakable air of fatigue colored Kojou’s glowing crimson eyes.

The moment she saw this, Yukina subconsciously gripped the spear holstered in its case.

From nowhere in particular, a silver chain appeared, entwining around her wrist.

“Calm yourself, Yukina Himeragi. In his case, a little spit and polish, and a wound like that will be healed in no time.”

A thin smile came over Natsuki as she spoke, seeing right through Yukina’s unease.

“However, if senpai continues losing blood, his consciousness will—”

“And how does your anxiety help with that?”

“Urk...”

Yukina held her tongue. Aradahl had specified that the duel with Kojou was to be one-on-one. If Yukina interfered, that in itself would be considered Kojou’s defeat. Such an action would trample underfoot the battle for which Kojou was risking his life.

“I understand you being concerned at seeing the man you’ve fallen for hurt, but it is a futile concern.”

Natsuki turned a sarcastic gaze Yukina’s way. Yukina proceeded to hold her silence for a whole three seconds.

“—He is merely my target for observation!”

“Surprisingly rational of you. I am relieved.”

Looking back as Yukina “corrected” her, Natsuki heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Yet, it’s all the same in the end. Do not get focused on the wrong person, Yukina Himeragi.”

“What...do you mean by that?”

Yukina, slightly thrown off, knit her brows. Natsuki gently stroked Glenda’s steel-colored hair.

“According to the information I coaxed from this dragon girl, when she was attacked on Blue Elysium by Aradah, apparently it was Kira Lebedev who aided her in her escape.”

“Lebedev— The Duke of Voltislava helped Glenda?”

With deep wariness, Yukina surveyed the topside of the *Oceanus Grave II*. Kira Lebedev was nowhere within view. However, the fact remained that he was known to be an aristocrat from the militant faction, and he was Vattler’s loyal cohort. There was no question that his actions were connected to Vattler.

“Of course, upon fleeing to Itogami Island, the dragon would rely on the Kojou Akatsuki of whom she was so fond. That she traced Kojou Akatsuki’s demonic energy to reach Saikai Academy proves the theory correct.”

“And since the Duke of Severin was chasing after Glenda, he would come into conflict with senpai as a matter of course...”

“It was no doubt anticipated that Aradah would demand Kojou Akatsuki fight him in a duel...by someone well aware of Aradah’s stiff-necked personality, that is.”

Yukina’s back trembled as she thought back to the uproar on the rooftop that very morning. Kira had aided Glenda, courting conflict between Aradah and Kojou as a result, with Yukina and Natsuki intervening. Perhaps all of it had been scripted beforehand. All to make the duel between Kojou and Aradah a reality—

“Why would someone go through all that trouble?”

“I have a fair idea what the Master of Serpents is thinking. He is using Aradah! as feed, a stepping-stone to hone Kojou Akatsuki. In doing so, Kojou Akatsuki will draw closer to becoming a complete Fourth Primogenitor.”

“...He wants senpai to defeat the Duke of Severin?”

“If Kojou Akatsuki cannot, it means he was not meant to be anything more,” Natsuki coolly explained.

However, if one looked at it another way, it seemed as if she was certain of Kojou’s victory. The same went for Vattler. If Kojou did not defeat Aradah!, having set up the duel between them would prove meaningless.

“You are paying attention to the wrong person, Sword Shaman. The issue lies not in Kojou Akatsuki—”

Natsuki was toying around with Glenda’s hair as she spoke. However, Glenda was concentrating on Kojou’s battle so much that she didn’t even notice.

On the breakwater, the lethal duel between Kojou and Aradah! continued. The battle was heavily tipped in Aradah!’s favor. Kojou’s Beast Vassal attacks were spectacular, but they had inflicted virtually no damage upon Aradah!. In contrast, the Intelligent Weapons wielded by Aradah! had definitively whittled Kojou’s endurance. His own blood had dyed Kojou’s clothing crimson, which only whipped the spectators into a greater frenzy.

“Do you not find it strange? Do you think a big shot on Aradah!’s level would come to Itogami Island for one little girl, even if she is a dragon?”

“That’s—”

Yukina hesitated midreply. In one sense, it was highly abnormal for a man bearing the title of chairman of the Imperial Assembly to visit the Far East Demon Sanctuary for the sake of a single dragon. If his objective was capturing Glenda, it would have been better had he commanded Vattler, already residing on Itogami Island, to do so.

“You mean the Duke of Severin had some kind of separate reason for coming to Itogami Island?”

“This little dragon girl’s existence posed an impediment to his achieving that

objective. Do you find my reasoning odd, Yukina Himeragi?”

“No.”

Yukina shook her head. Natsuki’s thinking was likely correct. However, in the end, it was nothing but speculation. The only way to find out Aradahl’s true objective was for Kojou to beat him. If Kojou lost, Glenda would be taken from them, and they would forever lose the opportunity to learn Aradahl’s true motive.

“Senpai...!”

Staring at the sight of the blood-soaked Kojou, Yukina, as if praying, murmured once more.

2

It was right after sunset when Nagisa and company arrived at the breakwater in the open-top convertible.

With the ominous scarlet dusk in the background, streaks of darkness and light danced about. Two wielders of immense demonic energy were engaged in a vigorous white-knuckle conflict. Their clash made the artificial isle itself tremble, and aftershocks of explosions and raging winds blew over Nagisa and the others.

“Uwaa, they’re really going at it...,” said the girl in the white dress sitting in the driver’s seat in a guileless voice. She dropped the convertible’s speed, driving onto an empty space at the base of the breakwater. They were some forty to fifty meters from where the pair of demons clashed. Any closer and there was a high possibility of being caught in their cross fire.

As a matter of fact, a container placed nearby had already been broken several times over, all semblance of its original shape lost.

“If you like, you can use this.”

The girl in the black dress in the front passenger seat presented something to Nagisa: binoculars, an expensive version that looked like the type used for military purposes.

However, Nagisa shook her head without a word. She didn't even need the binoculars to make out one of the silhouettes fighting. Even a long distance removed, there was no way she could mistake the sight of him.

"Kojou..."

Nagisa murmured her older brother's name. Kojou was fighting, his entire body bearing grievous wounds. He was attended by enormous phantom beasts. Kojou was employing masses of demonic energy summoned from another world so dense, they were sentient and could manifest in physical form. In other words, a vampire's Beast Vassals—

"What is this...? Why is Kojou fighting?! Fighting a vampire... Almost like he's a vampire, too..."

Still in a daze, Nagisa got out of the car, posing the question to no one in particular.

Nagisa did not know what was happening. Nor did she know why Kojou was fighting. Then, the confused Nagisa heard the soft, gentle voice of another man.

"This is because your brother is the Fourth Primogenitor."

"...?!"

Nagisa's gaze shifted in surprise, settling upon a man in a pure-white three-piece suit who'd come to stand behind Nagisa at some point. He was a handsome, blond young man. There was a smile on his lips that could bewitch the unwary. That grin terrified Nagisa.

"Fourth...Primogenitor...?"

"Yes, the Fourth Primogenitor. The World's Mightiest Vampire."

The young man nodded in amusement. As a resident of a Demon Sanctuary, Nagisa knew of the existence of a vampire known as the Fourth Primogenitor. She'd heard any number of urban legends about him since arriving on that island.

Supposedly, he was a monster who had annihilated numerous cities in times long past, possessing no kin whatsoever, desiring nothing to rule. Served by twelve Beast Vassals that were calamity incarnate, he drank people's blood,

slaughtered, and destroyed: a cold, heartless vampire who existed beyond all doctrines of the world.

“No way... Kojou can’t be...a vampire...”

Nagisa vehemently shook her head. She was so scared that her breath caught.

Her heart was racing. Her vision darkened. Her body could not stop shaking.

At some point, without her knowledge, the biological older brother she’d trusted to be human had changed into a Demon—and a terrifying, legendary-class vampire at that. But no matter how she might deny it, undeniable spectacles unfolded before her eyes over and over.

She felt like she’d been deceived. A Demon had crept in a place so very close to her, wearing an innocent face. She was struck by the sense that the world she had believed in had crumbled beneath her feet. She felt disgust, distrust, fear, hatred. Her consciousness was blotted out by negative emotions.

But deep inside her heart, a voice echoed, denying it all. Someone inside of Nagisa herself, someone unknown to her, was desperately speaking up for Kojou, saying that nothing about him had changed—

“What are you afraid of, little sister of the primogenitor? Root no longer exists within you,” he whispered in her ear.

Something trembled at the very bottom of Nagisa’s consciousness. A fragment of some assuredly lost memory floated up, like a shadow behind a canvas.

“Root... Root Aurora...,” she murmured, dumbfounded.

“Yes. You destroyed her. Kojou Akatsuki and the other you deep down inside —”

The young blond man smiled. Nagisa let out a yelp. Her thoughts were a mess, and her vision warped. Her body and consciousness could not cope with the torrent of flashbacks. Kanon drew close in concern, shouting something toward Nagisa, but Nagisa could not hear her voice.

“Why is...? This can’t be real...”

Nagisa’s vision was dyed crimson. Inside it, Kojou’s lethal duel continued.

Kojou's expression twisted in agony as a vampire clad in dark armor sliced his body all over.

"Why, to save you, Nagisa Akatsuki. He quarreled with Root and became the Fourth Primogenitor to save you."

Only the voice of the smiling young man reverberated clearly within Nagisa's mind. Nagisa covered both ears, vehemently shaking her head like a little girl.

"It's all my fault... It's my fault Kojou became a Demon..."

"That's right. You're responsible for all this." His voice rose, still grinning. Long white vampiric fangs were poking out from his lips. "Had he not become the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou would not be here in a deadly duel. The opponent he fights is Velesh Aradahl, one of the top-five fighters even in the Warlord's Empire. As he is now, Kojou cannot defeat him. At this rate, your older brother will be consumed..."

"Con...sumed...?"

Nagisa lifted her tear-drenched face. She beheld Vattler, his cruel, snakelike eyes gazing back at her own.

"Yes. Kojou will be consumed. By the very, very scary vampire—"

"No... No..."

Nagisa murmured with hollow eyes. Without realizing it, she began a wobbly gait toward the tip of the breakwater where Kojou and his opponent were fighting.

"Stop it... If I don't save Kojou..."

"Nagisa—!"

Kanon tried to stop Nagisa. However, before her fingertips could touch her, a powerful and violent blast of wind rushed against her. Kanon was on the verge of being blown away when her bodyguard, Justina, held her tight.

Nagisa's ponytail danced about, unraveling from the wind.

Nagisa was staring toward ground zero, to a patch of earth that had been clawed out, where Kojou had fallen, lying faceup. She could see countless dark

short swords impaling his whole body. Fresh blood was spilling out of his tattered limbs, and a groan of anguish trickled out from his throat.

The instant she saw that, light returned to Nagisa's eyes.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Together with a scream, vast demonic energy was unleashed. Transparent, icy wings spread across the twilight sky, dying the world in merciless, destructive, cold air.

3

His sense of time had muddled.

Kojou no longer knew how long had passed since the battle with Aradahl had begun.

Perhaps it hadn't even been a minute, but it felt like he'd been fighting for hours. His endurance had already been whittled beyond his limit; in his condition, he was running on willpower alone. Even so, he could not find a way to defeat Aradahl. For the first time since obtaining the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou rued his own powerlessness.

"...C'mon over, Dabih Crystallus!"

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal covered in silver crystals. It was a dragon with a spiral horn and translucent wings that radiated light.

"...?!"

Captivated by the radiance of that horn, Aradahl's Beast Vassals came to a halt. The armor covering the whole of his body forcibly removed itself, leaving Aradahl, its master and host, defenseless.

The Ability of Dabih Crystallus, tenth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, was mind control—the power of Charm that vampires possessed. That overwhelming power of domination had controlled Aradahl's armor Beast Vassal.

"Al-Nasl Minium—!"

Now that Aradahl had lost his protective iron wall, the scarlet bicorn roared toward him. The cannonball of compressed air burst against the ground, proceeding to gouge its surface.

Before being enveloped by the explosion, however, Aradahl vanished from sight. He had teleported. He had leaped through a slash through space itself made by a new Beast Vassal.

“...So you seized the control rights of my own Beast Vassal... A troublesome power.”

“Wha—?!”

Hearing Aradahl’s voice from behind him, Kojou turned his head in shock. Kojou didn’t have a chance to catch sight of him; Aradahl had leaped through the void once more.

Kojou’s face contorted with fear. He couldn’t use the power of Charm if he could not see his foe. And as if to toy with Kojou when he was on the verge of fleeing, Aradahl’s sudden attack sent him tumbling. The naked bloodlust that slammed into him made every hair on Kojou’s body stand up.

“Butcher, Spelbia—!”

“Urk— Mesarthim Adamas!”

Kojou deployed a diamond bulwark. Spawning on the inner side of that bulwark was a crack in space itself, severed by a blade. His bulwark, neutralized by an otherworldly slash, could not stop the pitch-black blade that cut across his whole body.

“Gu...ah...!”

Fresh blood spurted out as Kojou fell to the ground. Hovering above his head was the cloud of black-bladed short swords. With Kojou having lost the spare energy to redeploy his bulwark, the tips turned toward him all at once, hungry for blood.

“—Dance, Ghoul!”

Aradahl’s Beast Vassal turned into a hail of meteorites, pinning the wounded Kojou to the concrete surface of the ground. Dozens of blades were impaling

Kojou, carving delicate portions of his flesh. Kojou made an incoherent scream.

“Surrender, Kojou Akatsuki. You cannot fight any further.”

Aradahl arrogantly beheld the sight of Kojou below him. The source of a vampire’s demonic power was from the Beast Vassals that dwelled within their own blood. However, the greater part of that blood had already flowed out of him, with Ghoula damming up whatever was left. The wounds were so grave that any normal vampire would have long since lost their life.

“Not...yet...!”

Kojou tried to force himself to sit up, almost ripping his torso free of both his pinned arms in the process. Aradahl heaved a disgusted sigh as he watched this reckless action.

“Ghoula.”

“—?! ”

The short swords remaining in midair flew, stabbing Kojou through his chest and shoulders. Kojou coughed up more blood; this time, his movements completely came to a halt.

“Though I do not think the Fourth Primogenitor’s inexhaustible demonic energy can be fully consumed, from the looks of it, you cannot hope to summon a new Beast Vassal. Acknowledge your defeat, Kojou Akatsuki. Or would you rather endure an eternity of suffering?” Aradahl calmly asked.

The Beast Vassal he dubbed Ghoul no doubt possessed the power to rob an impaled opponent of his demonic energy. Just as Aradahl had asserted, Kojou presently lacked the strength with which to summon a fresh Beast Vassal. With even bodily movements sealed off, he was thoroughly backed into a corner.

“A so-called immortal body is a prison for the soul. The peace of death, granted by rights, is something we vampires will never know. Thanks to the continued regeneration of our bodies, our nerves shall never wither. Nor can we lose our sanity to escape from mind-rending pain. How long will you maintain that false courage?”

Aradahl calmly laid out the facts. As a vampire, he understood the drawbacks

of having an immortal body better than anyone. Regenerating only to have more mortal wounds inflicted, over and over for the rest of eternity, was the same as unending torture. There was no way for Kojou to escape that limitless pain save acknowledging his defeat.

“Shut...up...!”

From within a consciousness blotted out by anguish, Kojou howled. Glenda’s smiling face floated into the back of his mind. So long as Aradahl sought to dispose of her, there was no way he could acknowledge defeat.

Besides, he’d promised Yukina. He would win and return to her side.

But in that moment, Kojou had no strength with which to fulfill that promise.

“Damn...it...”

Amid biting pain that seemed ready to break his entire body to pieces, Kojou felt an odd sense of *déjà vu*.

The feeling of powerlessness in the face of impending death—Kojou had tasted that feeling once before, long ago.

That was before Kojou had obtained the power of a vampire. These were the memories of the ruin of The Cleansing that had supposedly been lost. At that time, Kojou had shielded Nagisa, losing his life once as a result.

And what saved him from that was—

“Mist...?”

A questioning look came over Aradahl as white mist began to fill his field of vision.

Among the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor was one governing the power to transform into mist. However, at present, Kojou didn’t have the strength to summon a Beast Vassal. Even so, the pure-white mist increased in density, covering the breakwater in the blink of an eye.

The mist that had appeared without any forewarning was purely a natural phenomenon. The water particles in the air had crystalized due to the precipitous drop in the air temperature. It was not the mist that was imbued with demonic energy—it was the freezing cold air itself.

“This demonic energy—?!”

Turning around, Aradahl’s eyes opened wide. The very next moment, he was assaulted by an explosive coldness, enough to freeze even a vampire’s body—a glacial spear made manifest.

The surprise attack from an unexpected direction blew Aradahl’s body away. Half his body froze and shattered, and for the first time, Aradahl’s face twisted in agony. The bright-white freezing mist proceeded to encase him in an enormous pillar of ice.

“What...the...?”

Bathed in even stronger demonic energy, the dark short swords pinning Kojou’s entire body vanished. Left to roll defenselessly on the ground, Kojou slowly shifted his head.

A small-statured girl wearing a Saikai Academy uniform gently crouched right by his side.

Her long, unbound hair seemed to slowly change color in the rays of the setting sun, and her baby-like face was struck with grief.

“Nagisa...what are you doing here...?!” Kojou exclaimed as he forced himself to sit up in midregeneration.

Nagisa Akatsuki was not a human that should have been anywhere near the stage of battle, and she was someone who could not be allowed to be there. Surely it was unthinkable for her, a sufferer of demonophobia, to be where she might be caught up in a duel between two vampires.

However, the girl taking Nagisa’s appearance supported Kojou’s wounded body, gently making a halting smile.

“Thou shouldst blame me, Kojou... For it is I who hath made thee shoulder such a heavy burden, granting thee suffering in the process...”

“You’re...”

Kojou’s eyes widened as he looked up at the girl in a daze.

He remembered her fearful sway, the distinctive tone of her voice. On Itogami Island, she had spent a brief, all too limited amount of time with Kojou, and

then, Kojou himself had killed her. It was her—the Twelfth, *Avrora*.

“Don’t tell me, you’re...*Avrora*...?”

“I am but a fleeting illusion... One that shall soon vanish...”

She responded to the bewildered Kojou’s question with a vague shake of her head. Then, she quietly lifted her face.

The enormous pillar of ice shattered, and *Aradah* emerged from within. Having already recovered from his shock, he gazed coolly at the girl nestled close to Kojou.

“*Dodekatos*... The twelfth *Kaleid Blood*...”

“Surely thou dare not assert this violates thy terms, *Aradah*? We, too, are part of the Fourth Primogenitor—”

Replying to *Aradah*’s murmur was a new silhouette emerging from within the dense mist.

This was a small girl in a *yukata*. Kojou deeply drew in his breath at the sight of her. She had golden hair that looked like billowing flames. And she had blue, blazing eyes. She had the same appearance as the *Avrora* that Kojou knew.

“*Hektos*... I see. *Vattler* put you up to this...” A bitter, irritated smile came over *Aradah*’s lips.

Dodekatos and the girl in the *yukata* called *Hektos* were “dolls”—survivors of the twelve artificial vampires created to seal the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Fearful of the revival of the god-killing weapon, the Fourth Primogenitor, the people known as the *Devas* ripped the twelve Beast Vassals from the Fourth Primogenitor’s body, sealing one in each of the twelve girls.

“The Fourth Primogenitor art served by twelve Beast Vassals—however, Kojou Akatsuki hath inherited but ten. The remaining two stand here before thee.”

The girl in the *yukata* touched a hand to her own breast as she spoke.

Aradah was silent for a moment before he broke into a fearsome smile.

Behind him, a dark mist gushed forth, materializing into an enormous long sword as supple as a whip.

“Certainly, it is the Fourth Primogenitor with whom I desired a duel. It would be unfair to deny him your aid— Very well. Accordingly, the dolls shall be annihilated with the master!”

“Kojou! Take my hand!”

The girl in the school uniform said this as she grasped the wounded Kojou’s hand. It was not Aurora. It was Nagisa’s voice. *Stay back*, Kojou’s voice tried to shout, but Aradahl’s surge of demonic energy muted it entirely.

Aradahl’s sword Beast Vassal swung upward as if wielded by a giant, invisible arm. The long sword, its blade reaching several dozen meters in length, bore down to mow Kojou and the others down in one fell swoop.

Nagisa glared at the master of that Beast Vassal and raised her and Kojou’s joined hands to the sky.

“Nagisa, don’t—!”

From behind them, Kojou could hear Kanon Kanase’s scream. Kanon, an excellent spirit medium, realized what Nagisa was trying to do.

Nagisa looked back at Kojou and Kanon. For one brief moment, she showed them a brilliant smile.

Then, she turned to the front and declared in a cool, clear voice...

“Please, Miss Aurora! C’mon over, Alrescha Glacies!”

The demonic energy felt nostalgic to Kojou. From Nagisa’s petite figure surged crisp, cold air. Using Kojou’s body as a catalyst, *both girls* unleashed all their remaining demonic energy.

What appeared was an enormous silhouette reminiscent of a glacier.

The upper torso was a human female. Its lower body had the form of a beautiful fish. There were wings extending from its back. It had sharp talons, like a bird of prey. It was a mermaid of ice, or perhaps a Siren—

This was the twelfth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s

Mightiest Vampire. Its name was Alrescha Glacies.

“—?!”

Both wielders of enormous demonic energy, the great black blade and the monstrous ice bird, collided head-on, and it was Nagisa's Beast Vassal that emerged the victor.

Aradahl, reeling from the backlash from the excess power of the overwhelming attack, took an icy stake to the heart and doubled over in agony.

“Aurora... Nagisa...”

Strength drained from Nagisa's fingertips as she gripped his hand. Nagisa's face was pale, seemingly drained of blood, and her fingers turned as cold as ice.

Nagisa, no more than a mere human, had controlled the power of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, unleashing its full might upon Velesh Aradahl. The cost of such a reckless act was high. Despairingly high—

“Nagisa...please...open your...eyes...”

All the strength gone from her body, Nagisa crumpled, and Kanon held her tight in Kojou's stead. For some reason, the earnest voice with which Kanon called out felt...distant.

You are not alone...

He felt like he heard Natsuki's voice. Her words had been the truth. It was Aurora and Nagisa who had granted him a chance at victory. Aradahl had not gone down no matter how much demonic energy Kojou assaulted him with, yet, those two girls had brought him to his knees.

Kojou finally understood. Why was it he could not defeat Aradahl? What was the true reason he couldn't fully control his Beast Vassals—?

“So that's...it...”

Kojou rose unsteadily to his feet. With unnatural movements, the blood that he had shed was drawn back into his wounds, time seeming to rewind as the wounds carved into his entire body vanished without a trace.

“So that's how it is... If I'd just listened to your voices sooner... Nagisa

wouldn't have had to..."

Kojou's voice was gentle. If anything, the demonic energy trickling out from him was tranquil. It was like the momentary lull before the arrival of a tremendous storm.

Simultaneously, the injured Aradahl rose to his feet. Noticing that Nagisa had collapsed, an expression of relief came over him. Kojou himself could not employ Alrescha Glacies—therefore, his victory remained assured. His expression was one completely confident of that fact.

The white mist was thinning out. It was about time the throng of spectators on the extravagant ship received the conclusion they desired. As if responding to their expectations, Aradahl summoned the Beast Vassal of the enormous sword once more.

"Awaken, Archadia—!"

Aradahl's attack was swift. Perhaps being injured by Alrescha Glacies had made him more cautious. Without warning, the single blow he unleashed must have exceeded the speed of sound.

But his attack never reached Kojou.

This was because Aradahl's Beast Vassal had been slammed into the ground before it could strike. The front paw of a lion shrouded in lightning had intercepted the saw-bladed long sword.

The lion, sprinting while wreathed in purple lightning, shot the supersonic blade down, proceeding to trample it into dust.

"Regulus...Aurum?! What have you done, Kojou Akatsuki...?!"

Aradahl's handsome face twisted in pain. His right arm, scorched from the shoulder down, vanished. The lightning lion Kojou unleashed had wounded not only the Beast Vassal, but Aradahl himself.

The reason it had ended at just the right arm was because Kojou had held back. Kojou had missed the attack on purpose. Surely it was none other than Aradahl himself who understood this best of all.

"Enough. This meaningless duel is over, Aradahl."

“What...?!”

“You’re definitely a terrifying opponent. You’re the strongest I’ve faced until now. *I* can’t hold a candle to you—but the same can’t be said for the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

The voice with which Kojou murmured was tinged with regret. He remembered Iblisveil’s words.

“It is not I whom you should be asking for advice—”

He was right. Iblisveil wasn’t the one Kojou should have relied on.

He should have relied on something closer—something within himself.

What determined the strength of latent demonic energy was the net weight of one’s personal history. In other words, it was the sum of one’s combat experience. The reason vampire primogenitors were so feared was because of the vast, off-the-scale Blood Memories they possessed.

Furthermore, Beast Vassals were masses of demonic energy with *minds of their very own*. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, or rather, the girls in which they had been sealed, had lived for a very long time.

The combat experience they possessed far outstripped Kojou’s. Kojou would never match Aradahl as a vampire. Yet, even Aradahl was no match for the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Nagisa and Aurora had gambled their very lives to convey that to Kojou.

Kojou didn’t need to “control” them. He merely needed to lend his ears to their voices and command them.

Trample the enemy before me—

“Spelbia! Ghoul!”

Having finished mending his right arm, Aradahl ignored Kojou’s words and commanded his own Beast Vassals to attack.

The air twisted as one blade made a surprise attack, with the other bearing down as a horde of dark short swords.

However, Kojou intercepted them like it was nothing.

As one blade rent space itself, a twin-headed dragon covered in quicksilver scales gouged out the extra-dimensional space in which it hid. The dense mist spewing from a shelled beast corroded the horde of short swords to mere blade shards.

“Urk...!”

Sensing that Kojou was counterattacking, Aradahl attempted to turn his body into dark mist to escape. But raging around him was a violent wind imbued with demonic energy. A scarlet bicorn shimmering like a mirage formed a bulwark of raging winds, preventing Aradahl from escaping.

“You think you can run?” Kojou spat without emotion.

Materializing once more, Aradahl’s entire body was impaled with countless slender, pointed stakes made of magma. Aradahl cried out in anguish before falling silent. Tormenting a vampire’s immortal body with an eternity of pain—Aradahl himself had taught Kojou this tactic.

“Surrender, Aradahl. *We’re all* pretty pissed. If you want this stupid duel to go on any longer—”

Burning with anger, Kojou summoned a pale-blue water maid—an Undine. This Beast Vassal, governing restoration, could roll back Aradahl’s personal history, annihilating his very being.

However, just before Kojou could unleash it—

“That is far enough, Kojou.”

Someone’s powerful hand grabbed hold of Kojou’s right arm, stopping it.

Shrouded in golden mist, a smile of satisfaction rose over Dimitrie Vattler as he stood.

Kojou’s eyes burned crimson as he glared at Vattler, violently brushing off his hand. However, the blond man looked back at Kojou with a gentle expression. Then, the Master of Serpents of the Warlord’s Empire solemnly declared, “This duel has ended.”

Kojou’s expression seemed dazed as he listened to the words. He did not understand what was being said to him.

Aradah! had not yet acknowledged defeat. Kojou had to defeat him. He had to protect Glenda. And he had to get Yui and Shio back. Why? Because he had promised these things—

With such thoughts inside Kojou's jumbled mind, Vattler gazed at him with amusement.

Then, once more, he gently made another declaration.

"Victory is yours."

4

Kojou released his Beast Vassals from their summons.

Freed from the stakes of magma, Aradah!, having lost their support, fell to the ground. Even so, he tumbled with grace. He glared at Kojou with burning eyes as he thrust one hand into the rubble.

"Do not interfere, Vattler... The outcome is not yet decided..."

Even as he violently coughed blood, Aradah! asserted he would continue the duel. However, Vattler gazed down at his compatriot with an indifferent smile.

"Obstinate even on the verge of death, aren't you, Aradah!? Do not be concerned. The opponent is the World's Mightiest Vampire. Your approval will not be diminished by this defeat. All the guests are more than satisfied."

"Silence... I did not fight for the sake of your trivial approval."

Aradah! turned bloodlust toward the smiling Vattler. The statement, with Aradah!'s typical bluntness, made Vattler raise his voice in a laugh of delight.

"You have done your job just as I expected. Your role has come to an end."

"My role...you say... Vattler, why you...!"

Even though he was having trouble breathing, the look in Aradah!'s eyes was grave. He had realized the possibility that the duel over the dragon girl had been orchestrated from its inception.

Seeing for himself that Aradah!'s will to continue fighting had trailed off,

Kojou let out a small sigh.

It was then that he felt the air ripple right by their side.

“—Kojou!”

A ripple-like teleportation gate spread forth. Appearing from within it was Glenda wearing a white dress. Next to appear was Yukina, wearing her familiar outfit. Lastly, Natsuki emerged, wearing a heavily frilled outfit.

“Kojou! Kojou, you won!”

Heedless of her dress being sullied, Glenda clung to Kojou with tears in her eyes. “Guoh!” coughed Kojou, his breath constricted by the impact. The wounds inflicted by Aradahl were yet to be healed.

“Senpai...your wounds...?!”

Seeing the blood coursing from Kojou’s body, Yukina’s expression was grave. Glenda, too, asked “Does it hurt?” with a misty-eyed look of obvious concern.

“I’m fine. More importantly, Nagisa—,” Kojou said in a raspy voice. “Please.”

Yukina nodded without a word.

Nagisa’s eyes were closed as she remained limp in the embrace of Kanon’s arms. Her pale skin felt cold, devoid of the warmth of life. Her splayed limbs were completely limp, making her appear like a soulless doll.

Though the recoil of using a Beast Vassal was what caused her to faint, there was nothing Kojou could do. Even though he was called the World’s Mightiest Vampire, the power the Fourth Primogenitor possessed was only suitable for destruction. As a trained spirit medium, Yukina was probably the only person present who could aid Nagisa.

However, when she tried to rush over, the girl in the *yukata* checked Yukina with her eyes and opened her mouth.

“This one’s time is at an end. Currently, ’tis only the power of the Valkyrie priestess that tethers her soul.”

“...Are you saying...Nagisa can’t be saved...?”

Kojou glared at the girl calling herself Hektos. Her glimmering blue eyes

narrowed, and the girl with rainbow hair coolly nodded her head.

“Should we do not wield the power of the Beast Vassal residing in the vessel of our flesh, the arrival of such a conclusion is...inevitable.”

“Why, you—”

“Senpai, don’t!”

Flying into a rage, Kojou tried to grab Hektos by the collar, but Yukina grabbed onto him and held him back.

Blaming Hektos was not going to save Nagisa. Kojou knew that, too. Even so, Hektos was surely connected to Nagisa having appeared in that place.

“Miss Justina, may I ask you to call an ambulance?”

With difficulty, Kanon averted her eyes from the sight of Kojou being so distraught and called out to her female knight bodyguard. “As you command,” said Justina, on standby behind Kanon, stooping as she took out a radio.

“No need to call them. I will take her.”

Natsuki spoke those words as she placed a hand on the comatose Nagisa’s shoulder.

Kanon, guessing what Natsuki had in mind, instantly nodded without hesitation. The next instant, the sight of Nagisa and Kanon slowly melted into thin air and vanished.

“Y-Your Highness...?!”

A nervous expression came over Justina as the principal she was allegedly protecting disappeared from sight. Natsuki looked back at the clamor made by the female silver-haired knight with visible annoyance.

“I am sorry, but Kanon Kanase will need to remain with her for the time being. After all, it seems that the spiritual energy Kanon is sending to Nagisa Akatsuki is what is keeping her alive at present.”

“Kanase’s... I see...,” Kojou frailly murmured as he closed his eyes.

The blood of the Royal Family of Aldegia flowing through Kanon’s veins probably made her a top-class holder of spiritual energy, even by Itogami Island

standards. Even if, unlike when she'd been turned into a Faux-Angel, that power stopped at the edge of human limitations, it did not change the fact that the spiritual energy she possessed was far beyond the norm. By lending Nagisa that spiritual energy, Kanon seemed to be just barely keeping her from wasting away.

"I have sent them to my barrier. A temporary measure, but she should be secure for the time being."

Natsuki bluntly supplemented her words. *My barrier* no doubt referred to the special, otherworldly space known as the Prison Barrier. Within that world, created to imprison sorcerous criminals, there was no flow of time. At the very least, Nagisa's condition would probably not worsen so long as she was in there.

"Sorry...Natsuki. Thanks...a lot..."

Though Kojou was deflated and on the verge of collapse, a look of relief came over him as Yukina held him up. Glenda, copying Yukina, was holding on to Kojou's other arm. With the aid of both girls' hands, Kojou somehow managed not to fall on his face.

For his part, Aradahl had already finished mending his flesh and was standing up. The sight made it hard to tell just who had been victorious.

Natsuki arrogantly glared up at Aradahl as she suddenly posed a question.

"Now then, answer me, Velesh Aradahl—why did you try to take this dragon hatchling into your custody? What is the reason the Holy Ground Treaty Organization fears Glenda?"

"...Holy Ground Treaty Organization?"

Kojou knitted his brows at the unfamiliar name.

"You know about the Holy Ground Treaty, do you not, Kojou Akatsuki?"

"W-well... yeah." He nodded. "I know that much, at least."

The Holy Ground Treaty was a peace treaty, the signing of which had brought the wars between humankind and Demonkind to an end. In exchange for recognizing that demons had rights identical to humans, Demonkind committed to observe international law.

Had that treaty not been formed, the killing between humans and demons would no doubt be ongoing to the present day. Nor was it likely that the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island would even exist.

“The Holy Ground Treaty Organization is an international agency composed of signatories of that treaty. Their objective is to maintain peace between humankind and Demonkind, and so, bring about their peaceful coexistence. The Warlord’s Empire is one participant. Japan is another.”

“...So you were trying to capture Glenda for this Holy Ground Treaty Organization? Why?” Kojou turned his eyes toward his defeated opponent.

Aradahl was the chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire. However, the involvement of an international agency like the Holy Ground Treaty Organization turned the whole story on its head.

“I will be the one to answer that question...”

As Kojou and the others stood there confused, Vattler drew their attention to him with a frivolous tone. The gazes of everyone present turned toward the youthful, golden-haired male vampire.

“Vattler, stop!”

Aradahl spoke in a sharp voice. However, heedless of him, Vattler continued.

“The objective of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization is to maintain peace between humans and demons. It was granted the right to employ military force to eliminate obstacles to this objective.”

“Military force?”

“The Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military—by which I mean them.”

Aiming his reply toward Kojou, Vattler tossed a smartphone his way. A low-resolution image was displayed on its high-precision screen.

It was an overhead image captured by a military satellite.

A fleet was pictured. There was an enormous aircraft carrier equipped with a full flight deck. In addition, it had an entourage of escort ships. He could see armored airships among them as well. Even from just what he could confirm on the screen, their numbers exceeded twenty. It was a great fleet able to conquer

a small nation with ease.

In a corner of the screen, he saw that the date was February 13—the very same day. There was some degree of time lag due to the satellite transmission, but the image was apparently being streamed in close to real time.

“Just a bit earlier, the Holy Ground Treaty Organization sent a dispatch to the Japanese government. To wit—the artificial isle known as Itogami Island has been determined to be a large-scale destructive sorcerous device forbidden by the Holy Ground Treaty. The gist is, they are saying they will proceed to destroy Itogami Island,” Vattler stated, exaggerating his sympathy.

It was Yukina who was terribly unnerved by his words. “Itogami Island... A large-scale destructive sorcerous device...?!”

“I see. That is their thinking... So they are treating Itogami Island not as Japanese soil, but as a giant device. For, if it is a simple device, they can destroy it even without the Japanese government’s consent.” Annoyed, Natsuki snorted.

“The hell does that mean?” Kojou looked between the two girls. “Wait... A sorcerous device? Itogami Island’s just gigafloats, isn’t it?”

“Meiga Itogami proved that Itogami Island is an altar that can be employed to reproduce The Cleansing...” His teacher glared at him as he spoke in bewilderment.

The forbidden formula to revive Cain and rewrite the world itself—Kojou was familiar with that power.

“The Cleansing is a vile sorcerous calamity that, if unleashed, would have repercussions on a global scale. And Itogami Island is a requisite component of that calamity. The Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s judgment is not an irrational application of law. Though, it is rather arbitrary of them.”

Vattler, nodding deeply in agreement with Natsuki’s explanation, turned his eyes toward the water’s dark horizon.

“The Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s extraordinarily convened international armada has already been assembled off Iwo Jima. At the earliest, they will likely finish the encirclement of Itogami Island tonight.”

“What about us...the residents of Itogami Island?” Kojou’s voice was tinged with nervousness.

Itogami Island was an artificial isle floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Its population was roughly 560,000 people. Of course, if Itogami Island was destroyed, they would not go unscathed.

“You have been granted twelve hours before the attack commences,” Aradah! answered. “Take shelter during that time wherever you might.” The emotionless, businesslike tone with which he said it was clearly intentional.

“...Twelve hours...?”

Kojou was speechless. Far removed from the Japanese mainland, travel to Itogami Island was restricted. It was impossible to evacuate 560,000 people in a mere half a day’s time, something the Holy Ground Treaty Organization was likely well aware of. They hadn’t meant to let Itogami Island’s residents escape to start with.

“Is there any way to make the Holy Ground Treaty Organization reconsider its decision?” Yukina asked in a hard voice. However, Aradah! merely shook his head.

Natsuki gave a cold smile mixed with self-derision. “If the Japanese government has the courage to defy the organization, it might be another matter, but that is surely a thin hope. Only a fool would make an enemy of the world for the sake of a single artificial isle.”

Kojou trembled with anger that lacked an outlet. Glenda gazed upon this with a look of concern. Her beautiful, hematite-reminiscent, steel-colored eyes beheld the sight of the wounded Kojou within them. That instant, Kojou came to harbor a faint suspicion.

“Wait a minute, Velesh Aradah!... So why did you try to dispose of Glenda? Right before the attack on Itogami Island like this...”

If Itogami Island was destroyed, Glenda would not be safe, either. Why had he tried to kill Glenda in spite of this? Even to the point of taking the unnecessary risk of a duel with the Fourth Primogenitor—

“Because she is the guardian,” Vattler answered for Aradah!, who remained

silent.

Aradahl's expression froze from shock. Kojou and the others did not notice.

"Guardian...?" Kojou repeated.

He stared squarely at Glenda. *I don't know anything*, said the shake of Glenda's head.

Vattler was the only calm one as an intoxicated smile came over him. He smiled like a scientist whose grand experiment had come to an end, delivering the answer he had desired.

"Yes... The guardian of the legacy left by Cain the Sinful God—the vessel for his information."

Aradahl and Natsuki had a dramatic reaction to those words.

"Vattler, why do you know about that?!"

"Tch—so that's how it is, Master of Serpents!"

Aradahl summoned a sword Beast Vassal, and Natsuki unleashed silver-colored chains. Both were immediately shot down by a torrent of demonic energy Vattler had unleashed. The offensive demonic energy finally changed shape into a serpent that was dozens of meters in length. It was a Beast Vassal of the Master of Serpents.

"Kojou Akatsuki, protect Glenda! The Cleansing is what Dimitrie Vattler's really after!"

Natsuki looked back at Kojou and shouted. Before Kojou could comprehend the meaning of her words, Vattler commanded his Beast Vassal to attack.

"Shakala—"

"Snowdrift Wolf!"

When the Beast Vassal finished completely materializing, it opened its enormous maw and attacked Kojou and the others. It was Yukina who intercepted it. Drawing the silver spear from its case, she intercepted and struck the serpentine Beast Vassal head-on.

The vast demonic energy scattered about by the Beast Vassal was rent by a

dazzling silver flash, dissipating in the blink of an eye. Yukina's spear, granted the name of Snowdrift Wolf, was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, a purging spear able to rend any barrier and nullify demonic energy.

"The *Schneewaltzer*... Well defended, as I might have expected."

Vattler clapped his hands in a show of praise for Yukina. During this time, silver chains unleashed by Natsuki entwined around Vattler's wounded Beast Vassal while Aradahl's swords bore down on Vattler himself.

Even so, Vattler's smile remained unchanged as he simply raised his right hand without fanfare. It was a polished and annoying gesture, as if he was ordering wine at a restaurant—

"Then, how about this?"

As Vattler stood defenseless, he came to be surrounded by a malevolent, vermillion radiance. Natsuki's chains bounced off; Aradahl's sword Beast Vassal vanished without a trace.

The radiance covering Vattler was, in truth, a veil of minute particles lined with ancient magical characters. Each and every one of those particles was its own magical circle imbued with powerful ritual energy. These vermillion particles of light began increasing in density and brilliance.

"That power...!"

"This cannot be...The Cleansing...?!"

Kojou and Yukina gaped. This was the vile forbidden spell left behind by Cain—The Cleansing, sorcery that could rewrite the world itself. Kojou and Yukina had previously tasted its might, so they knew painfully well that neither the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor nor the demonic energy-nullifying Ability of Snowdrift Wolf could fend off that vermillion radiance. The only thing that could oppose The Cleansing was the vast divine essence Yukina gave off when in her angelicized form.

"I see, Master of Serpents—you robbed Meiga Itogami of his Blood Memory, did you not...?" Natsuki said.

"Correct, Witch of the Void."

Vattler bared his long canine teeth as he smiled.

Blood drained from Kojou's whole body. He'd consumed the missing Meiga Itogami, obtaining Meiga's knowledge of The Cleansing for himself—that was what Vattler was saying.

It was not that he felt sorry for Meiga Itogami. He was a sorcerous criminal, and in one sense, a dead man already. Vattler drank Meiga's blood, thereby inheriting his memories.

All to obtain a new power.

As if to show Kojou that this was the true nature of all vampires—

“But who is running the sorcerous calculations for The Cleansing...?”

The final question Yukina voiced carried a hint of fear.

Kojou's heart raced.

The Cleansing, the magic of the Sinful God, demanded the expenditure of incredible demonic energy commensurate with its power and enormous sorcerous calculations completely impossible for humans. Even if Vattler was a vampire, it wasn't the sort of thing you could use by yourself.

The artificial isle of Itogami Island had been designed as an altar for the activation of that Cleansing. The dragon lines coursing atop the Pacific Ocean provided the mystical energy required to activate it. The artificial isle also possessed five supercomputers with which to conduct the sorcerous calculations.

Though, however excellent an altar Itogami Island might be, that was insufficient to control The Cleansing. The only one capable of completely controlling the magic of Cain was a genius programmer with a godlike level of skill. And no cybermancers of that scale had been confirmed to exist.....except for one.

Accordingly, they called her...

...the Priestess of Cain.

“No way...”

Before Kojou could say more, Vattler unleashed his attack. Vermillion radiance covered the entire breakwater, transforming it into a beautiful crystal of ice beneath Kojou's and the others' feet.

This was an attack via The Cleansing, transforming the very essence of matter.

This crystal cracked, shattering into smithereens. Fragments of ice danced up like snowflakes. Kojou and Yukina fell like radgolls.

Glenda let go of Kojou's hand, instantly reverting to dragon form. But before she could spread her wings, a giant arm reached up from within the shattered ice and grasped hold of her.

"Glenda...!"

As he sank into fine particles of frost, Kojou desperately reached out with his hand.

In reality, the giant arm that had caught hold of Glenda was a metal manipulator arm. A crimson robot tank had emerged from under the breakwater's surface to carry out Glenda's kidnapping.

The robot tank was also enveloped by the malevolent radiance of The Cleansing. And upon that tank's shoulder was a lone girl, sitting with her legs crossed. It was a high school girl with an extravagant hairstyle.

"Asagi...why would you...?" Kojou murmured in a daze as he stared at the girl on top of the tank.

As Kojou did so, Asagi looked down at him, lips unmoving. He felt like he heard the girl's voice.

Sorry...

The breakwater turned ice crystal began to collapse. Seawater forcefully flowed in from the cracks, further accelerating the collapse.

The robot tank upon which Asagi rode accelerated, vanishing into the twilight.

Vattler was no longer in sight, either. The only ones left on top of the breakwater were Natsuki and the wounded Aradahl.

"Senpai—!"

Thrusting her silver spear into a block of ice, Yukina earnestly reached a hand out toward Kojou.

However, as he floated amid the freezing seawater, Kojou didn't even notice.



CHAPTER FOUR
A WAR OF
PRIMOGENITORS

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1

In a cabin near the ship's hold of the cruise ship *Oceanus Grave II*, Shio, wrists still bound, peeked out the window. The arrival of night had darkened the harbor, so it was difficult to tell what was going on outside the porthole.

"It's gotten quiet. Do you think the duel is over?" murmured Yuiri, dressed in a swimsuit, and with nothing else to keep her warm save a jacket.

Like Shio, both of Yuiri's hands were tied behind her back. They had lost to, and were subsequently captured by, Velesh Aradahl back at Blue Elysium. They had been treated more politely at the start, but having ignored instructions and plotted to escape several times, their treatment had devolved to the current situation.

Incidentally, due to Shio's particularly obstinate attitude, they had been threatened with having to wear frilly magical-girl cosplay outfits the next time the pair attempted to escape. Hence, Shio and Yuiri were in a situation where they could not casually attempt an escape.

"I wonder if Kojou Akatsuki lost...", Shio said in a frail voice.

She and Yuiri had been informed beforehand that Kojou Akatsuki and Aradahl were to duel over Glenda. Powerful demonic energy had jostled back and forth ceaselessly until moments before, but it had completely come to a halt now. The duel had probably been decided.

"No way. Kojou is the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire."

Yuri pouted a bit as she refuted Shio's words. For some reason, Yuiri had been soft on Kojou Akatsuki since the incident at Kannawa Lake back at New

Year's.

“But the opponent is the First Primogenitor's right-hand man. It seems like Kojou Akatsuki doesn't have a complete command of his vampire powers, either. If he has to follow a duel's rules, wouldn't you normally think he'd lose?” Shio rationally pointed out. Then, like she was speaking to herself, she added, “Besides, Kojou Akatsuki's a bit of a flake. For a primogenitor, he's not very dependable.”

“What can you expect? He's still young. You comparing him to Gajou makes me feel sorry for him.”

“W...we're not talking about Gajou right now!” Shio's voice went shrill. However, Yui took Shio's objection in stride.

“If Kojou really does lose, what do you think will happen to us?”

“...I don't know. Since there's the Holy Ground Treaty, I don't think the treatment will be that awful, but it is a fact we attacked the Duke of Severin, so...”

Having spoken those words, Shio bit her lip. The Lion King Agency had assigned Shio and Yui the mission of guarding Glenda, but using that as justification to engage a VIP of the Warlord's Empire in combat sounded a bit thin. The two were still only apprentice Attack Mages, and they'd failed in that very mission of protecting Glenda. If the Warlord's Empire blew it up into an international incident, the chances the Lion King Agency would cut them loose were high.

“So they really will interrogate us—to make us tell them secret information of the Lion King Agency...”

“Uh, n-nah, I'm sure they wouldn't. It's not like we know much secret information to begin with—”

“Then, human trafficking or something... Selling us to a sex industry of some sort...”

“Th-that's stupid. Even nobles of the Warlord's Empire wouldn't stoop to something like...”

Shio hid her own internal worries as she retorted. At present, Shio and Yuiri were not in the custody of the famously well-mannered Aradahl, but the highly notorious Dimitrie Vattler. To be blunt, she had no idea how Vattler meant to treat them once the duel was over and their value as hostages had come to an end.

“Shio.”

Noticing the sound of footsteps approaching the cabin, Yuiri spoke in a quiet voice, nodding guardedly to Shio.

“Get back, Yuiri.”

Shio approached the cabin door. From that position, was the crew member guarding them to enter, she could instantly attack and take the person hostage, but Yuiri shook her head to dissuade Shio from such thoughts.

“Shio, don’t! If we resist, this time they’ll put us in cosplay outfits!”

“It’s better than being sold as slaves!” Shio yelled, more for her own benefit than anyone else’s. Certainly, the day pictures of them in magical-girl cosplay outfits would be distributed to those close to them, she felt she would lose something precious to her as an Attack Mage, but that didn’t mean she could just take being kept captive.

Thus resolved, Shio girded herself as the cabin door opened right before her eyes. Entering was a silver-haired youth, his confident stride betraying no openings. He was a vampire with a handsome face reminiscent of a cold blade.

“A-a man...?!”

Shio was shaken, freezing up at the Demon’s unexpected appearance. Having lived and trained at an all-girls’ boarding school, her case might not have quite been on the same level as her classmate Sayaka, but Shio had a somewhat difficult time dealing with men nonetheless.

Perhaps astutely sensing Shio’s fear, Yuiri stood up with trembling legs and stood before the young man.

“Don’t lay one hand on Shio. Do with me what you like, but at least spare Shio —”

“Y-Yuiri, you idiot!”

Shio hastily tried to push Yuiri back, resulting in both trying to shield the other. The vampire youth gazed gloomily at the pair, sighing at the sight of them getting worked up on their own.

“Oh my, Count Jagan...have you done something to these girls?”

The woman who entered the cabin next looked up at the youth, posing the question with visible amusement. Wearing a blue suit, the beautiful woman gave off the air of having a good head on her shoulders. Her words made Shio and Yuiri realize the silver-haired youth’s identity: Tobias Jagan. He was an Old Guard vampire, aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire, and said to be Vattler’s confidant.

“Don’t ask me. They started a ruckus all by themselves.”

Jagan spoke with a sour tone. His hands gripped a silver long sword and a recurve bow in its folded form. These were Rosen Chevalier Plus and Freikugel Plus—Yui’s and Shio’s weapons, supposedly lost during combat with Aradah. Jagan bluntly placed both atop the cabin’s sofa.

It was a moment later that the woman in the three-piece suit beckoned with her hand, and a small figure came rushing in. Her steel hair flapped all around as she pressed herself hard against Shio and Yuiri, like a dog embracing its master.

“Yui! Shio!”

“Glenda?!”

“You’re all right?”

“Dah!”

The small figure was actually Glenda. She was wearing an expensive-looking white dress and a pretty tiara. A joyful smile came over her, with her entire body projecting an expression of happiness.

“Kojou won? Against the Duke of Severin?” Yuiri asked.

“Yes. He performed splendidly.” The woman in the suit smiled warmly.

“I do not recognize that pathetic fighting as victory. Aradahl is too soft,” Jagan said with the tone of a pouting child. Apparently, he was loath to accept Kojou’s victory over Aradahl.

“Are you letting us go, then?” Shio, confused, sought to make sure.

The woman in the suit nodded. “Yes. However, before you go, would you care to have dinner with us?”

“Dinner? Food?” Glenda’s ears perked up as she turned to listen. Her long, steel-colored hair swayed back and forth like a dog’s tail.

“Yes. And there is someone who wishes to meet with you,” the woman in the suit stated in a highly suggestive manner. Yuiri nodded deeply.

“Let’s go, Shio.”

“Yui?”

“There’s no reason for you to deceive us at this point, is there? They could dispose of us at any time if they wanted to.”

“...You have a point. It would be inexcusable to return to Master empty-handed. We need to get a handle on the situation, at least. I wonder what Kirasaka’s going to say...”

“Food, food, food...”

Humming in a pleasant mood, Glenda followed the woman in the suit. Shio and Yuiri picked up their respective divine arms and trailed behind the other two with tension in their steps.

A sour look remained on Jagan’s face as he joined them. His duty was no doubt to keep an eye on Shio and Yuiri. He seemed determined to stay out of the conversation as much as he could.

The interior of the ship was broader than Shio and Yuiri had expected. The sight of numerous foreign guests and their heavily armed escorts could be seen in the café and lounge. Shio and Yuiri were unfamiliar with the native attire they wore. They were probably people from non-signatories to the Holy Ground Treaty with little intercourse with Japan.

The woman in the suit led the pair to an area where the security was

especially strict, nearly the most of any part of the vessel. It was a VIP suite.

As they entered the room, an unadorned, modern-weapons system flew into the corner of Shio's vision. It was a crimson robot tank fitted with heavy weaponry.

"Uwaa?!"

Reacting to the body temperature of those entering the room, the spinning movements of the multi-eyed sensors caused Yuri and Shio to cling to each other in surprise. For some reason, Glenda seemed accustomed to the sight, barely reacting when she saw the tank. Then, Yuri looked up at the tank as she let a dazed murmur slip.

"That tank... It's like the one back at Kannawa Lake..."

"Kannawa Lake...?"

Somehow recovering from her initial surprise, Shio narrowed her brows with a questioning expression.

Kannawa Lake, deep in the Tangiwa Mountains, was the place where the pair had first encountered Glenda. If the pilot of this robot tank was the same as the one back at that place, it was not something they could pass off as mere coincidence.

And behind that rounded tank, they heard a young voice from the back of the room that bore little sense of tension.

"Asagi, please bring more pizza. No onions, thank you."

"Lady Empress, I desireth meat. Also, could I troubleth thee to bring a game console cable as well?"

"Oh, geez, you two are so noisy. When did this become a day care center?"

Three rather distinctive girls were sitting around the table with a relaxed air.

One was an elementary school girl with an adorable face wearing a uniform from a famous girls' school. Another was a small-statured redhead wearing a piloting outfit resembling a regulation school swimsuit.

And the third was a high school girl with an extravagant hairstyle wearing her

school uniform improperly on purpose.

“Ah, finally. Over here!”

Noticing Shio and Yuiri entering the room, that high school girl beckoned them over with her hand. Staring at her face, Yuiri blinked several times over.

“Miss...Asagi Aiba?”

“Ah? Have we met somewhere?”

Sitting cross-legged on top of the sofa, the high school girl tilted her head. Shio’s eyes went wide in surprise.

“Asagi Aiba, you mean that local idol?”

“I’ve had, ah, enough of that, so... Please forget all about that.”

Asagi limply hung her head. Apparently, Shio had touched a part of her past she would rather have left untouched. Yuiri immediately tried to follow up, shaking her head.

“I met you once at Kannawa Lake. You’re in the same class as Kojou, yes?”

“...Kojou?”

Asagi narrowed her eyes in wariness. The nonchalant way Yuiri had spoken his given name tugged at her. “Oh well,” she soon said, giving a casual shrug as she motioned the pair toward empty seats.

Upon the table lay pizza, sweets, bottles of juice, and other treats. The atmosphere felt like an all-girls sleepover. No doubt this ambience was somehow connected to Jagan’s sour mood.

“But why are you on the Duke of Ardeal’s ship? Aren’t you Kojou Akatsuki’s girlfriend?” Shio soberly asked, facing Asagi.

“G-girlfriend...?”

Asagi, nibbling on the corner of a slice of pizza, made a small cough that seemed like a nervous twitch. Shio found the girl’s unsophisticated reaction a little surprising. In contrast to her glamorous appearance, her personality seemed surprisingly pure.

“Am I wrong? That’s what Kirasaka told me, you see...”

“I-is that so? So Kirasaka sees me as... Heh, really...”

Though she somehow maintained her composure, Asagi Aiba seemed rather pleased. In reality, Sayaka had called Asagi one of the girls Kojou Akatsuki had laid his hands upon, but Shio thought better of putting it in those words.

“Um, Asagi Aiba?”

“Ah, sorry. By the Duke of Ardeal, you mean Mr. Vattler, right? I made a deal with him.”

“A deal?”

“Yes. I cooperate with Mr. Vattler, and Mr. Vattler lends me a hand in return. Our mutual desires align, you see.”

“R...right...”

Shio gave a rather vague nod. She didn’t have a clue what to say to the girl. A high school girl who could make a deal with Dimitrie Vattler as his equal—it was something beyond Shio’s comprehension.

“Don’t tell me, you’re the Priestess of Cain that Tartarus Lapse was after?”

“Ah... Yeah, that kinda happened, too, didn’t it?”

Asagi looked up with an annoyed expression. Her reaction made Shio accept things somewhat. If she truly was the Priestess of Cain, dealing with Vattler on equal footing was far from impossible.

“So what does the Priestess of Cain want with us?”

“I thought it was better if I took the time to explain...”

Speaking those words, Asagi surveyed the faces of Yuiri and the others. The two elementary schoolers sat politely on the sofa, quietly listening to Shio and company’s conversation.

“Heh-heh.” Asagi grinned proudly. “I mean, don’t you want to know the reason people are after Glenda? Incidentally, Glenda’s true nature, too.”

“Miss Aiba, you know this?” Yuiri asked, leaning forward.

“Well, I *am* the Priestess of Cain, you know,” said Asagi as she puffed out her chest. “Also, you can call me Asagi.”

“Asagi!”

Glenda, right beside Asagi, smiled amiably toward her.

“Good girl.” Asagi stroked Glenda’s head. “You trust me?”

“Dah!”

“Thank you. All right, Glenda, acknowledge code.”

As Glenda nodded, Asagi peered into her eyes as she made a mischievous smile.

Her left hand was holding a pretty pink smartphone. The icon on the screen, resembling a badly sewn teddy bear, made a malicious grin.

Hearing Asagi’s words, Yuri paled and rose to her feet. However, before Yuri could stop her, Asagi had finished reciting the code.

“49 7265717567374 6173 7375636573736f72. We demand the relic as the rightful inheritors.”

2

Kojou awoke atop a soft bed.

He was in a room in a totally new apartment. Due to the lack of furnishings and private possessions, it gave off a fairly inorganic impression, but the owner of the room seemed to be female. Someone’s dresses were on hangers against the wall, and there was a faint, lingering whiff of perfume. The dresses seemed to actually be maid outfits.

“You have come to, Kojou? Unexpectedly quick of you.”

As Kojou lay there, he heard a voice above his head that came off as haughty. Kojou’s hazy vision displayed a doll in an exotic outfit, not even thirty centimeters in height.

“Nina...?”

Kojou looked up at the liquid metal life-form once known as the Great Alchemist of Yore, Nina Adelard. The current Nina ought to have been kept at

Natsuki Minamiya's mansion as Kanon Kanase's pet.

"This room is?"

"Astarte's bedroom. Natsuki brought you back to this building with her. You apparently collapsed from using up your power during the duel with Velesh Aradahl," Nina said with an exasperated smile. "So immature."

Kojou finally grasped that she had technically watched over him until he returned to consciousness.

"Oh, all right... Asagi... Where did she go with Glenda...?!"

"If you mean the ship of the Warlord's Empire's Master of Serpents, it is moored at Itogami Island's inlet."

"She's on Vattler's ship...?"

Kojou clutched his head in confusion.

He should have realized it as soon as he'd seen Asagi and Jagan together. Jagan, a confidant of Vattler's, would never make contact with Asagi without a good reason. Asagi had probably teamed up with Vattler for some reason or other. If so, kidnapping Glenda had to be nothing more than a means to some kind of end—

"At the moment, the Warlord's Empire's Master of Serpents is not making any move of note, but given the nature of the opponent, the Island Guard cannot make any careless moves against him. In the first place, I do not think the Gigafloat Management Corporation is at liberty to pay him much heed."

Nina made the assertion with a farsighted tone of voice. Even during the time Kojou had collapsed, the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military's armada was approaching Itogami Island. The Gigafloat Management Corporation's staff had to have their hands full trying to form countermeasures. He didn't think they would put the Island Guard in motion over a dragon abduction that wasn't even public knowledge among Itogami City residents.

"Shit," Kojou cursed foully as he sat up fast. "Where are my clothes?"

"Rejoice, for it is I who has mended them by hand. See, right here."

Nina pointed to the bedside table. Since Kojou's clothes had been in tatters

from the duel with Aradahl, he would have been grateful to have them repaired by alchemy. However, it was not a Saikai Academy's schoolboy uniform resting on the table, but a gold-colored tuxedo with a dazzling luster.

"Um... What the hell is...this?"

"I am saying, it is your change of clothes. I merely employed my own discretion to make some minor improvements."

"You call these improvements?!" shouted Kojou.

Apparently, Nina had not stopped at merely repairing his clothes, but she had altered the molecular composition of the threads as well. Transmutation was alchemy's master-level art.

"This outfit's gonna make me look like a circus clown! Turn it back, right now!"

"Goodness, you really do not have any sense of taste... This is so trendy."

"You're the last person I wanna hear the word *taste* from..."

Kojou covered his eyes in annoyance. Nina grumbled aloud as she turned the gold, sparkly tuxedo back to ordinary clothes. Someone must have heard the loud exchange, for there was a reserved knock at the door just as Kojou began to put on his clothes.

After awaiting Kojou's reply, Yukina opened the door and entered. Appearing next was a homunculus girl with indigo hair—Astarte.

"...Senpai? Is it all right for you to be on your feet already?"

Seeing Kojou sitting on the bed, Yukina gave an expression of concern. She was no doubt being considerate not only for his wounds and blood loss, but also the mental shock of having been betrayed by Asagi.

Realizing he'd caused her a great deal of trouble, Kojou reflected honestly upon his actions.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm all right already."

"You do not look like it..."

Seeing Kojou put on a strong front and rise to his feet, Yukina let out a tiny

sigh. She proceeded to walk in front of Kojou, putting a hand to the collar of his uniform. It was only then that Kojou finally realized that he'd wrongly fastened one of his shirt buttons. That was the fault of getting up in a daze and dressing in a hurry.

"Try not to make me worry too much, would you?"

Speaking with a pained smile mixed in, Yukina refastened the buttons of his shirt. Kojou, drawn in by the faint rustle of her bangs, drew his face near.

"Himeragi...you smell...nice for some reason..."

"I—I do?!"

Kojou's sudden utterance sent tension running through Yukina's entire body.

"Goodness," muttered Nina, and Kojou heard her sigh deeply.

"Kojou...what do you think you are doing, sniffing the body odor of the girl taking care of you?"

"Erotic...," said Astarte in an emotionless murmur.

"It's n... It's not in a weird way; I just thought she smelled kind of sweet..."

"You're doing better than I thought," Yukina said in a sarcastic tone, baring her white teeth at Kojou. She proceeded to meticulously refasten the last of Kojou's buttons, which he thought was very much like her.

Kojou silently shook his head, abandoning all thoughts of excuses.

"Astarte, what time is it?"

"It is 2356 hours and forty seconds. It will be midnight very shortly."

"So I've been out for close to five hours..."

The homunculus girl's perfectly accurate reply instilled a great deal of nervousness in Kojou.

The duel with Aradahl had been conducted just after sunset. A fair bit of time had passed since the subsequent kidnapping of Glenda. Whatever Asagi's and Vattler's objectives had been, the odds were not low that they had already been achieved.

“Where’s Natsuki?”

“Answer: Master’s current location is the living room. Commencing route—”

Speaking with the tone of a car navigation system, Astarte walked into one of the apartment building’s mazelike corridors. Kojou and Yukina rushed to follow. Finally, they arrived at the living room, where Natsuki was elegantly tilting a teacup all by her lonesome. She did not seem even the slightest bit nervous, looking the same as always.

“So you have finally awakened, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Natsuki gently returned the teacup to the table as she haughtily made the statement.

Kojou sat in front of her even before being prompted. He didn’t want to waste precious time on pleasantries.

“What’s going on with Nagisa?”

“She remains inside my barrier. There is no need to worry. Kanon Kanase is with her as well.”

Natsuki’s expression did not change in the face of Kojou’s impolite question. The Prison Barrier was the alternate dimension constructed inside her dream, for which the price was her eternal sleep. To purely stop Nagisa from wasting away, there was no safer place than inside Natsuki’s time-suspended barrier. However, the fact that the passage of time was halted also meant he could not hope for her to recover in any way.

“That said, the young Akatsuki sister is in a precarious state, parched of spiritual energy. Leaving her in the barrier too long runs the risk of her being eroded by my dream. I would like to bring her out as quickly as possible.”

“In other words, we have to find a way to save Nagisa before that happens—”

Kojou lowered his eyes in anguish.

Nagisa’s primary caregiver was her mother, Mimori Akatsuki, but in the end, she was a scientist, nothing more. She had no deep knowledge where magic was concerned. Even if she tended to Nagisa, Kojou could not expect effective treatment from her.

In the first place, the terrifying circumstances—her daughter’s spiritual energy being drained by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—were not something he could explain to Mimori, let alone that said Fourth Primogenitor was actually her own biological son.

“Could we not get in touch with Aiba?” Yukina abruptly changed the topic, seemingly in consideration for the silent Kojou.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Natsuki with a shake of her head.

“Yaze doesn’t seem to be responding to texts, either.”

“Why the hell would Asagi work with Vattler...?”

Kojou lifted his face to see Natsuki. Natsuki looked back at Kojou with a mystified expression.

“Try asking yourself that question, Akatsuki.”

“Huh? I didn’t do anything to Asagi. I didn’t do a single thing to put her in a bad mood...”

Kojou rebutted Natsuki’s words of blame with complete seriousness.

Natsuki glared at him in response.

“Sometimes, a woman is known to alter her tastes and personality to suit the object of her desires. It is only natural to think that Aiba became fed up with you and thought of switching to that Master of Serpents—”

“How the hell is that a natural thought process?! In the first place, Asagi’s not some maiden-in-love character to begin with, right?!”

“You’re the only one who thinks so, fool...”

For once, a look of visible despondence came over Natsuki. As if on cue, everyone present except for Kojou sighed in unison. *The heck’s with this atmosphere?* thought Kojou, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

“Even if it is love, why would Asagi fall for Vattler all of a sudden? There’s bad taste, and then there’s that, okay?”

“The Warlord’s Empire’s combat maniac and the Fourth Primogenitor—I do not think there is so much distance between the two. Besides, at the very least,

he is far handsomer and richer than you.”

“Oh, shut up!”

Kojou put his cheek to his palm in a visible sulk. Apparently, it was futile to ask Natsuki about it any further.

Sure, he couldn’t dismiss the possibility that Asagi had fallen for Vattler, but the fact remained that such an act felt very much out of character. Asagi was too shrewd to be fooled by Vattler, let alone be brainwashed by him. It was far more natural to speculate that their relationship was based on mutual interests. If not, Asagi having some reason to kidnap Glenda would become inexplicable.

“Come to think of it, what’s happening with that Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military thingy?”

Kojou shifted the topic once more. Natsuki nodded without a word, pressing a switch for the television embedded in the wall. It was a cable channel run by the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

“As before, the multinational armada is approaching Itogami Island. The corporation’s people are no doubt in a big uproar trying to work out countermeasures. They should be making a public announcement any time now.”

“Public announcement...?”

“Rumors have already begun to spread. They have no doubt determined that they cannot hide it any longer. The spread of incomplete information runs the risk of sparking a panic.”

“But there’s no guarantee telling them the truth won’t cause a panic either?” Kojou retorted.

“I suppose not,” replied Natsuki, unmoved. “Therefore, they surely intend to guide the course of the chaos. The damage should be minimized that way.”

“So that’s how it is... Dammit...”

Kojou grudgingly agreed. The Holy Ground Treaty Organization launching an attack on Itogami Island was not something they had vaguely predicted, but a decision made on the spot—that was the unvarnished truth. And it wasn’t just

the Gigafloat Management Corporation that lacked the power to defy that decision, but the Japanese government itself. It was a fundamentally unresolvable issue. At present, all the Corporation could do was seek to minimize the casualties by any amount possible. A public announcement would no doubt be for that purpose.

In the first place, just how many residents of Itogami Island could flee in the little time remaining?

“Himeragi, any word from the Lion King Agency?”

“From Master, nothing... And this is on a scale beyond what a single Sword Shaman can deal with...”

Yukina hung her head and clenched a fist. The Lion King Agency was meant to deal with terrorism caused by sorcerous criminals. By nature, an international armed conflict was beyond the scope of the Lion King Agency’s jurisdiction by its very nature.

Kojou wore a serious expression as he stared at Yukina, shaking his head.

“Nah, that’s not what I mean. If it’s just you, can’t they give you a way to get out, Himeragi? Like, take some sort of special route for government people. Sword Shamans are crucial for the Lion King Agency’s combat strength, right, Himeragi? And you’re not from Itogami Island to begin with...”

Yukina shot a bewildered look at Kojou as he stated this calmly.

As someone related to The Cleansing incident, Kojou felt a fair bit of responsibility for Itogami Island’s present situation. Even if the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military’s attack was unavoidable, he at least wanted to get as many people off the island as he could—and for that sake, his resolve was hardened, even if it meant taking on a multinational fleet.

All the same, even with the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, it was likely impossible to destroy that vast armada. After all, the Holy Ground Treaty Organization was backed by the genuine vampire primogenitors. The odds of Kojou returning alive were virtually zero. He couldn’t drag Yukina into a reckless battle like that.

Either way, if Kojou, her observation target, was to die, she’d lose her reason

for being on Itogami Island. So before it came to that, he wanted to at least allow her to escape.

“Kojou...by any chance, are you...an idiot?” Nina gave Kojou a look of pity as she spoke, exasperated from the bottom of her heart.

Natsuki turned a gaze upon Kojou that was even colder. “I see. Aiba casting you aside makes complete sense.”

“Concur. Recommend immediate rescindment of statement followed by apology.” Even the ever-emotionless Astarte spoke in a frigid tone.

The girls’ hostility threw Kojou for a loop.

“What...? I’m not saying anything weird, dammit. Rather than stay here for the sake of some stupid mission, isn’t it better for Himeragi to go back to the mainland right—?”

“I—!”

Instantly, Yukina shouted, flying into a rage as she forcibly interrupted Kojou’s words. In the period that Kojou had known her, it was the first time he had seen her emotions shown so openly. Her incredible force of presence took Kojou aback.

“Um, huh?”

“...As I still have the *stupid mission* of being senpai’s watcher, I shall stay until the very end! The very end, you hear?!”

Yukina’s explosion of anger was only for a single second. She immediately suppressed her emotions, glaring at Kojou as she spoke. Her tone would not take no for an answer.

“Uh...but...”

When Kojou tried to rebut her even so, one glare cowed him into silence. Kojou looked up to the heavens in apparent resignation. It was the next moment that the image on the television screen suddenly changed.

“So it has begun.”

Natsuki quietly murmured as she tilted her cup of black tea.

The scene displayed on-screen was a press conference. A young man wearing a suit was sitting there, surrounded by a number of microphones. It was Kazuma Yaze, city manager of the Gigafloat Management Corporation and older brother of Motoki Yaze, Kojou and Asagi's classmate.

"We interrupt this program for an urgent announcement. The Gigafloat Management Corporation is currently conducting a special press conference directed at all residents of Itogami Island—"

A male announcer with a tense expression faced the camera as he read from a script.

The image suddenly became jumbled. A digitally created darkroom giving off a cyberspace-like image came to be displayed in the image's stead. A desk that looked straight out of a news studio was hovering in midair. And sitting at that desk was a girl very familiar to Kojou.

"A...Asagi?"

"Aiba...?!"

Kojou and Yukina said her name simultaneously. Wearing a suit resembling a newscaster's and highly conspicuous red glasses, Asagi stared at Kojou and the others through the camera on her end.

"Citizens of Itogami City, good evening. This is Asagi Aiba."

Asagi spoke in an intellectual voice she rarely employed. Kojou knew that if one had to pinpoint her true nature, this was it. Asagi had given off exactly this impression of a mature and serious girl the first time Kojou had met her.

"In place of the Gigafloat Management Corporation and the government of Japan, I would like to make a very important announcement. First, please look at this image—"

An image floated onto the screen behind Asagi showing the multinational armada of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military. Compared to when Kojou and the others had first seen it, the number of warships had clearly increased.

"Some of you are likely already aware of this, but six hours prior, the Holy

Ground Treaty Organization declared to the Japanese government that it has determined Itogami Island to be a large-scale, destructive, sorcerous device.”

Viewer comments submitted to a social networking feed were scrolling along the side of the screen.

At first, the comments were mostly either singing Asagi’s praises or making fun of her before they finally changed to serious ones. They immediately realized that Asagi’s live broadcast was not some kind of elaborate joke.

“In addition, it stated that twelve hours after its declaration, made at six ^{PM} Japan time, the fleet composed of the various nations contributing to the Holy Ground Treaty Organization will execute an attack upon Itogami Island.”



Suddenly, the viewer reactions were drenched in shock and bewilderment. Heated arguments were arising from all over the Internet. The program Asagi had put together had likely paved the way for a good percentage of them.

As if to bolster her argument, data spread out behind her with tremendous force.

“Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult to evacuate all of Itogami Island’s residents in the little time that remains. Furthermore, there is no city inside Japan that will take the over twenty thousand demons present on Itogami Island.”

Asagi then broke off her words. The exceedingly impactful declaration accelerated the pace of the viewer comments scrolling on the screen. Amid that vortex of blame and anger, Asagi smiled beautifully.

“In the face of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s act of heavy-handed tyranny, I hereby propose a war of resistance—”

“War of resistance...?! ”

Yukina drew in her breath in apparent fright.

“She wants to fight that armada?! How...?! ”

Kojou exclaimed in a daze. The Gigafloat Management Corporation only possessed the meager combat capability to deal with sorcerous criminals within the island. There was no way it could defy that powerful multinational armada.

As if to answer this misgiving, a new figure appeared at Asagi’s side. It was a young male vampire, his body clad in a white three-piece suit. The social network comment feed was blanketed with shock once more.

“This operation is underpinned by an alliance with His Excellency Dimitrie Vattler, ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary from the Warlord’s Empire. Furthermore, starting with the Moscow Empire and the Confederate States of America, twenty-two countries across the globe have pledged their support.”

A number of lights flashed on a world map displayed on the screen. The red lights indicated the national territories that had announced their support for

Vattler. In contrast, the national soil of the Holy Ground Treaty nations was blotted out with black. Thus, the world had been divided into two camps, red and black, with Itogami Island at the center. The neutral nations, displayed in white, felt overwhelmingly few.

“No one will be forced to participate in this Itogami Island defense operation. Those who wish to evacuate, please escape Itogami Island as swiftly as you can. We will support and assist your safe evacuation to the greatest extent possible.”

Asagi grinned as she spoke those words. The powerful glint rising into her eyes was one Kojou knew well.

“However, please rest easy. We possess enough combat capability to resist the Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s tyranny. Please behold: the altar of the Sinful God, protector of Itogami Island—”

Asagi gently touched the screen of a smartphone she had placed on the desk.

That instant, an incredible shudder raced through Itogami Island. Raging, violent winds from the four corners of the Earth made the entire artificial isle tremble like a leaf. It was an impact that fundamentally differed from that of an earthquake, a typhoon, or any similar natural disaster.

If Kojou had to use a metaphor, it was as if an enormous, invisible hand was lifting the entire island onto its palm. No, the contours of the island really were rising above the water’s surface. Aerial footage from unmanned aircraft conveyed the state of affairs in rich detail.

Emerging from the parting surface of the sea was an unfamiliar, steel-colored rampart.

The interior of the rampart was clustered with buildings large and small, looking like resplendent palaces and plazas.

Others still were enormous turrets and gun fixtures. He could see facilities resembling harbors and runways, too.

The sight resembled an ancient ruin and, at the same time, a near-future spaceship.

The air warped. Suddenly appearing over the ocean’s surface was an

enormous artificial isle dwarfing Itogami Island.

With Itogami Island at the center, the steel-colored gigafloat swirling around it like a nebula buried the surface of the nighttime sea.

“It’s the same...the same thing I saw in Nod...”

Assaulted by a sense of déjà vu, Kojou rose to his feet.

The sight of that city was familiar to Kojou. Amid the encroachment of Nod, created by a sorcerous device of the Accursed Soul, he’d seen the lingering vestige of that city for only a second—just long enough to carve it into his memories.

“This is the Legacy of the Sinful God...,” Yukina murmured, almost sighing at the sight on the screen.

The beautiful yet malevolent scenery of the artificial isle broadcast that it was at once a city and a citadel built for war. The Legacy of the Sinful God was a giant military fortress.

This was probably the actual weapon used by the armies of Cain, the Sinful God, for the war, and the spell, bearing the name of The Cleansing. Asagi and Vattler, masters of the new Cleansing, had summoned the fortress city once more.

This, using the power of the dragon girl who was its guardian—

“Now I get it, Asagi... This is what you needed Glenda for...!”

The sight of Asagi and Vattler had already vanished from the television screen. All that was being displayed was the scenery of the giant fortress city.

Somehow, the sight felt nostalgic to Kojou as he simply stared in a daze.

3

“And we’re good!”

Vika, the blond beauty of the Oceanus Girls, switched the microphone off as she spoke.

They were in a simplified broadcast studio aboard the cruise ship *Oceanus Grave II*. The live pirate broadcast they'd conducted by hijacking Itogami Island's broadcast network had just concluded.

"Great work, everyone. That was dead-on. The response on the net is incredible."

The girl, with a blue tablet in hand as she played the role of director, brought Asagi a cold bottle of mineral water. Asagi downed the bottle in a single swig before flopping limply over the desk.

"Who would have thought idol status would come in handy at a time like this?"

With their role at an end, she tossed the conspicuous glasses aside, sighing with a complex set of feelings.

Just a short time ago, Asagi had been pressed into service as a local idol, becoming the symbol of Itogami Island's restoration. Thanks to that, she'd become incredibly famous, something that had caused Asagi herself no small amount of grief, but it had resulted in that triumph. Surely no one would listen to an ordinary high school girl proposing a war of resistance on the TV.

"What's the Holy Ground Treaty nations' reaction?" Asagi asked Lydianne while she removed her stuffy jacket.

"Just as Sir Mogwai simulated. At the moment, various nations appear to be biding their time. Should there be actual damage to the multinational fleet, some nations may cometh forward and respond to negotiations, but..."

"If we overdo it, we'll just make Itogami Island seem more dangerous. Tough spot to be in, huh."

These words spoken, Asagi put her cheek against her palm.

The multinational armada approaching Itogami Island had been formed ad hoc from national militaries. Their goal was the destruction of Itogami Island, but at the same time, they were extremely fearful of depleting their martial strength.

No country actually wanted casualties among its own soldiers. If they became

aware that Itogami Island's resistance was fiercer than expected, exposing their soldiers to danger, the general public and opposing politicians in those nations surely would not remain silent. The voices blaming governments for frivolously engaging in military actions would doubtlessly become loud. Using those cracks to sue for peace with them was Asagi's plan.

To make that plan a reality, Asagi had to play up Itogami Island's combat strength as much as possible while keeping the damage to actual living people to an absolute minimum. If a great number of casualties were incurred, it would spur hatred toward Itogami Island, and Asagi feared that this might plunge them into a genuine war.

To be blunt, it was a dangerous gamble. Even so, there was no other way to save Itogami Island.

"Mogwai, status of the Legacy?"

Asagi lifted her face and called out to the smartphone.

"*Keh-keh-keh-keh,*" went the AI taking the form of a badly sewn teddy bear, laughing with even greater delight than usual. The five supercomputers that controlled Itogami Island had already finished connecting to the Legacy of the Sinful God, working out its various functions along the way.

"Well, it was left abandoned for thousands of years. I tried getting its self-repair function going, but the demonic energy reactor is empty. Seems like it'll take a while to charge up, too."

"Itogami Island is full of spiritual energy for large-scale sorcerous experiments, right? Can't you manage somehow?"

"Complete restoration is off the table, but if it's a portion of the defense systems, that I can do."

"I'll settle for that. Do it."

"Aye, aye."

Responding to Asagi's laid-back order, Mogwai began booting up the Legacy.

Returning the unresponsive smartphone to her pocket, Asagi went back to her own cabin. Lydianne followed along in her crimson robot tank. She probably

meant to serve as Asagi's escort.

Yui and Shio were waiting in the cabin for Asagi and company.

Glenda was curled up on the bed, making little snores here and there. Unsurprisingly, Yume looked sleepy as well. Lydianne was probably fine because she was used to being up late at night.

"Asagi...!"

"So this artificial isle is the Legacy that Glenda was protecting?"

Noticing Asagi, Yui and Shio rushed over, posing their questions.

"Well, yeah," said Asagi as she smiled vaguely. "In the alternate dimension they called Nod, it was, like, a city to protect humanity, a fortress, a shelter, that kind of thing—in modern language, feels like we'd call it Cain's ark."

"Ark...," Yui murmured with a hardened expression.

"However, instead of animals, 'tis packed with a horde of ancient weapons," Lydianne teased. Seeing the tense expressions on Yui's and Shio's faces, Asagi forced a smile as she shook her head.

"The gist is, this is one part of the magic called The Cleansing. With that world-rewriting power, we reeled in Cain's entire legacy. This city is Cain's armory. With the people and the troops all gone, they've been pretty lonely holding the fort."

Listening to Asagi's explanation, Yui and Shio met each other's faces in silence. Glancing at the sleeping Glenda, Shio posed a question in a quiet voice.

"What does it mean...Glenda's the guardian?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. The guardian of the route to where the treasure is kept—it's easier to say that she's the one who knew the spatial coordinates where Cain's ark had been sealed inside of Nod. Cain entrusted his own legacy to her."

"I see... So that's why Glenda went into the encroachment of Nod back then..."

Haltingly, Yui mumbled to herself. She seemed to be remembering some

past event.

Shio knit her brows as she put her thoughts in order.

“Should I take this as Glenda lifting the seal because she acknowledged you as the Priestess of Cain?”

“Not exactly... It’s Kojou she recognizes, not me.”

Asagi looked up at the ceiling as she shook her head. Yuiri and Shio blinked in bewilderment.

“Kojou?”

“Kojou Akatsuki is the Fourth Primogenitor, right? Isn’t he Cain’s enemy?”

“But that girl’s really fond of Kojou. Am I wrong?”

“Mm...”

“Now that you mention it...”

Yui and Shio crossed their arms as they began mulling over the matter in earnest. However, Asagi had no intention of explaining things to the pair any further. Though she’d established a working hypothesis, Asagi couldn’t possibly be confident as to whether it was really the truth.

“Either way, Glenda’s duty is over. I don’t mind if you take her and go. What are you gonna do, though? I think it’s a bit difficult to get off Itogami Island at the moment.”

After lowering her eyes, visibly perplexed, Yuiri stared at Asagi and posed a question.

“Asagi, you seriously intend to protect this island?”

“Well, it can’t really be helped, can it? That Holy Ground Treaty Organization bunch is attacking either way. The government can’t protect us, so we have to do it ourselves.”

“...Why go that far?”

“Because I was raised here in the Demon Sanctuary, that’s why.”

With Yuiri looking straight at her, Asagi averted her gaze just slightly as she

replied. Then, she gazed at Lydianne and Yume, the primary school duo, and gave a strained smile.

“Besides, it’s not like I’m doing this alone.”

“It’s not...like I am doing this for Asagi’s sake, either, you know.” Yume’s cheeks reddened as she murmured with a visible sulk.

“Such opportunities doth gather this much live combat data cometh not often, so...,” Lydianne replied, invigorated.

That moment, as Asagi changed clothes, her smartphone vibrated a single time. An oddly humanlike synthetic voice coursed from it.

“Li’l miss, the enemy fleet’s gone on the move. Two destroyers have separated from the fleet, probably to do forward reconnaissance.”

“Well, that figures... Yume, Tanker.”

Nodding at Mogwai’s report, Asagi turned toward the elementary school duo.

“Yes.”

“Acknowledged.”

Yume and Lydianne immediately stood up and nodded. There was no need for detailed instructions. Everything was moving in accordance with their initial plan.

Clutching her favorite laptop, an impetuous smile came over Asagi as she shouted.

“You’ll regret trying to lay a hand on our island—let the war begin!”

From behind the enthused trio, Yui and Shio stared, at a loss.

4

Natsuki Minamiya’s apartment building, built on Island West’s plateau, was her personal possession. Natsuki’s room was on the highest floor, and one could view the water’s distant horizon from its veranda.

However, at present, all that filled Kojou and the others’ vision was a vast,

artificial isle spreading out in a spiral. Cain's legacy, manifested by Asagi, covered the surface of the sea. The scenery was at once twisted and malevolent, yet, it gave off a mechanical beauty.

"As expected of Cain... It is quite magnificent."

Standing on Kojou's shoulder, Nina Adelard let out carefree words of praise, as if all this was someone else's problem.

"It's too damn big... What the hell's with this artificial island...?"

Kojou made a fragile rebuttal. The island was truly egregious in size. It had completely enveloped Itogami Island, with an empty urban landscape devoid of people, surrounded by a metallic wall covering all 360 degrees. Even if Kojou ran all day and night, he didn't feel like he'd completely make it across the island's circumference. He felt like the might of the world-rewriting Cleansing was being deliberately rubbed in his face.

"Through trilateration, I have made a simplified estimate of surface area."

With a thick range finder in hand, Astarte reported in an unmoved tone of voice.

"Surface area of the newly emerged artificial isle portions estimated at one hundred and twenty times to one hundred and fifty times that of Itogami Island itself. However, this is a number for reference only, applying solely to the portions exposed above sea level and ignoring the effect of the atmospheric refraction rate."

"A hundred and twenty times that of Itogami Island...?"

"Affirmative. Either estimate is the total area of a small country."

"So she just dragged this stupidly big thing out of another dimension..."

Kojou felt an endless dread that made his shoulders visibly shudder.

A moment later, he heard a light sound, like that of a small doll falling over. Yukina, realizing something was wrong, immediately turned around, and swiftly leaped into the living room. Kojou reflexively followed her.

The first thing they saw was a teacup that had tipped over. Droplets of tea coursing onto the table formed a smear upon its white surface resembling a

pool of blood, and upon it lay Natsuki Minamiya.

The small-statured witch was limp with her eyes closed, defenseless in her fallen state.

“Ms. Minamiya...!”

Yukina picked Natsuki up. However, no sign of life returned to the side of Natsuki’s refined face.

“Natsuki? What gives all of a sudden...?”

“I do not know. However...”

Yukina touched her fingers to Natsuki’s wrist. She probably meant to take Natsuki’s pulse. However, a fiercely shaken look came over her eyes. There was no response whatsoever from Natsuki’s delicate wrist.

“She’s dead...?!”

Yukina murmured the words as if she could not believe them. *No way*. Kojou, wobbling, fell to his knees.

Someone violently thrust something small into the back of Kojou’s skull. *Bonk*, went the small hand striking the top of Yukina’s head.

“I would prefer you did not kill off your teachers unbidden.”

Kojou and Yukina heard a haughty yet somehow lisping voice from behind.

Turning around, Kojou’s eyes were greeted by Natsuki, who was wearing a white one-piece negligee and clutching a pink teddy bear against her. Kojou’s eyes bulged. The other Natsuki wearing an extravagant dress was still in Yukina’s arms.

“Two...Ms. Minamiyas?”

“...Don’t tell me, this is Natsuki in the flesh?”

Kojou murmured in a small voice as he touched his hand to the cheek of the Natsuki clutching the bear. Unwittingly pulling on Natsuki’s cheek, he found it soft, conveying the warmth of her body.

“Stop speaking about me like I am meat on a rack.”

The Natsuki in sleepwear violently slapped Kojou's hand away.

It was then that Kojou realized the truth behind her emergence. This was the young girl who had formed a pact with a devil, continuing to sleep while trapped in her own dream—that was the true nature of the Witch of the Void. The real Natsuki, who ought to have been in the Prison Barrier, had appeared that moment, awake and in the real world. That was why the doll she used in her stead had ceased to move.

“An effect of Aiba's Cleansing. The materialization of Cain's legacy interfered with spatial control, destroying the seal upon me. The Prison Barrier has emerged into reality.”

Natsuki clicked her tongue. Kojou grimaced in turn. He recalled having laid eyes upon that prison on the night of a late autumn festival.

Natsuki Minamiya had sealed a prison, meant to incarcerate criminals deemed dangerous even by Itogami Island standards, inside an alternate dimension of her own personal creation. This was the price she had paid to obtain the power of a Witch.

However, spatial disturbances created by The Cleansing had destroyed Natsuki's pocket dimension. As a result, Natsuki had awakened from her dream, and the Prison Barrier had been returned to the real world.

“...We gonna have a repeat of what happened back during Hollow Eve Festival?”

Kojou lowered his voice. Recalling how Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of Notaria, had engineered a prison escape of sorcerous criminals, he did not realize how his expression had hardened. Things were chaotic enough already; the Gigafloat Management Corporation had nothing to spare for dealing with escaped prisoners.

However, Natsuki continued clutching her bear as she shook her head with a neutral expression.

“There is no effect on the prison's functionality. It is not like back then. After all, I, the warden, have not lost my magical power.”

“—Meaning, those sorcerous criminals ain't gonna get outside...”

“The problem is the fact that I have awakened from the dream.”

As if to pound a nail into Kojou’s relief, Natsuki glared at him without bothering to blink.

“Huh?”

“Have you forgotten? Time was stopped for Nagisa Akatsuki only because she was inside my dream.”

“Ah...!”

When he understood the meaning of Natsuki’s words, Kojou felt all the blood in his body run cold.

Natsuki’s barrier was what had bought them time in order to save Nagisa. They’d just managed to keep Nagisa’s condition stable by incarcerating her in a pocket dimension cut off from the real world.

But that barrier was broken now. Nagisa, still parched of spiritual energy and on the verge of death, had been returned to the real world once more.

Spiritual energy supplied from Kanon was somehow tethering her to life, but in her unstable condition, that was unlikely to hold for long. They no longer had a second to lose to save Nagisa’s life.

“You cannot redo the seal upon the Prison Barrier?” Yukina asked, her voice shrill from nervousness.

“A troublesome sorcerous ritual is required to send it into another dimension. Either way, I cannot employ large-scale spatial-control magic until the effects of The Cleansing subside. Restoring the seal is impossible for the time being.”

“Can we not at least send only Nagisa and Kano back int—”

“The cessation of time inside the Prison Barrier is merely a side effect of the curse upon me. I cannot cut unrelated persons off from the flow of time at my own convenience. Unfortunately.”

Natsuki replied in an emotionless voice. Yukina, at a loss for words, fell silent, for now she understood—even Natsuki, with the power of a witch, could not save Nagisa from her current state.

“Take us to wherever Nagisa is. Right now!”

Kojou drew close to the nightwear-clad Natsuki. Still clutching her teddy bear, Natsuki nodded.

“Understood. Come.”

5

Sitting in the captain’s chair of the missile destroyer *Crossley*, a naval commander sipped on a cup of cold, bitter coffee.

By rights, his ship was assigned to the North American Union Pacific Fleet, but at present, it was acting as part of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military’s multinational armada. The current location of the *Crossley* was at sea some 520 kilometers south of Tokyo, on its way to destroy the large-scale destructive sorcerous device known as Itogami Island.

The crew members on the packed bridge were being worked to death analyzing the information transmitted from patrol aircraft. They’d already confirmed through visual imagery the full contours of the mysterious artificial isle appearing in the sea around Itogami Island. Its coastline had a length exceeding one thousand kilometers—a fortress city on an unfathomable scale.

“So this is Cain’s legacy—”

The commander coldly smiled, concealing his internal unrest.

“I wasn’t enthusiastic about slaughtering five hundred thousand civilians, but this does make it a little easier, doesn’t it, XO?”

“The enemy’s combat strength is unknown. At the present juncture, I cannot judge whether this constitutes ‘easier.’”

A white lieutenant commander sitting in the executive officer’s chair replied in a voice that barely sounded human.

The commander found his well-educated, rationalist XO to be a difficult person to deal with. *Tough bastard to like*, thought the commander, venting internally. Even a homunculus came off as more human.

“UAV imagery?”

The commander asked, lips twitching in annoyance. The XO’s expression remained unsociable as he turned the tablet in his hands the commander’s way.

“See for yourself.”

“What...is this?”

The commander knitted his brows as he gazed at the image displayed by the tablet. On that screen were dancing cartoon characters meant to appeal to children.

“It is not just this ship’s UAVs. The imagery from patrol aircraft and orbital satellites is all like this. Our tactical data link appears to have been hacked.”

“Hacked? Is that even possible?”

“Perhaps, for someone with an absurd amount of skill.”

The executive officer nodded with a neutral stare. The commander subconsciously bit the nail of his thumb.

“Can we aim this ship’s main guns at the island directly?”

“There is still time remaining before the attack is slated to begin, according to the HGTO directive...”

“They won’t care. It’s not like we’re attacking Itogami Island itself. I’ll leave target selection to you.”

The commander rudely spat out the words. Even if the tactical network was unusable, that posed no obstacle to human-piloted reconnaissance craft and measurements by eyesight. Surely a little naval gunfire would gain them a great deal of information about the enemy defense system and armor composition.

“Aye, aye. Turret No. 2, prepare the long-range land-attack projectile. We are expected to support the ground forces, so prioritize destruction of coastal structures.”

“Turret No. 2, entering fire-control sequence now.”

One after another, crew members announced their compliance with the XO’s command as the ship instantly went on red alert.

The *Crossley* was equipped with a 155 mm single-mounted gun employing shells propelled with the assistance of magic, granting it a firing range in excess of a one-hundred-kilometer radius. The mysterious artificial isle that had appeared in Itogami Island's environs was already within attack range.

However, before the gunner had established the target for attack, a communications operator looked back with tension on his face.

"Emergency message from the *Ducane* while on patrol. An object is approaching this ship from underwater!"

"—A submarine?"

The commander's hips grew a little lighter. No information had come to him that Itogami Island deployed attack submarines. However, their opponent was Cain's legacy. Nothing was out of the question.

"Prepare for anti-submarine combat! Emergency CIWS, hurry!"

The executive officer rapidly issued commands. Even among destroyers of its generation, the *Crossley* was a ship granted particularly high-precision anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Through an underwater search system employing magical detection, it had succeeded in virtually nullifying all submarine stealth capabilities. Even if the opponent was Cain's legacy, its superiority remained undaunted. But—

"Image on screen!"

"...What the hell is that?!"

Looking down at the captain's chair monitor, the naval commander's eyes bulged. The mechanical spirit photography characteristic to the pale screen displayed an unfamiliar object. It was an enormous silhouette resembling a gigantic whale—or perhaps a sea serpent. It was moving at a depth of two thousand meters, leisurely swimming at the bottom of the deep sea. No anti-submarine missile could reach such depths.

"Current position of unknown vessel?"

"Approximately thirty-five kilometers southwest. Currently approaching this ship at over forty knots. Unknown vessel's total length is...in excess of four

thousand meters...!”

The sonar operator’s shout sounded like a scream. Fierce unrest spread throughout the bridge. Past or present, no submersible weapon existed that exceeded four thousand meters in length. None, save but one single exception —

Everyone present knew that weapon’s name.

It was a sea monster recorded in holy script. It was the World’s Mightiest Living Creature, created by the very gods.

Trembling, the commander voiced the monster’s name.

“Leviathan...!”

6

A stonework cathedral stood on a tiny artificial island covered in rocks.

It was this cathedral that was the true Prison Barrier in which Itogami Island’s sorcerous criminals were incarcerated.

The pocket dimension that Natsuki Minamiya, a preeminent witch, had herself crafted incarcerated this artificial isle whole. Itogami Island’s Prison Barrier was feared as a place from which escape was absolutely impossible.

However, that very moment, the small artificial isle floated atop the sea, utterly defenseless.

It was some forty to fifty meters from the shore of Itogami Island proper to that mass of rocks. Connecting the two artificial islands was a floating bridge of simple construction, flickering like mirage with a fickle sway. It served as proof that the space around the Prison Barrier was unstable.

“Hurry, Akatsuki! Vroooooom! Vrm—vrm—vrm! Screeech!”

“Don’t yell sound effects when riding on top of someone else’s head!!”

Kojou angrily shouted at Natsuki, dressed in nightwear, as he ran at full speed. Thanks to the lingering aftereffects of The Cleansing, she was unable to teleport them to the Prison Barrier’s interior.

With Natsuki reverting to the child she appeared to be, Kojou could not abandon her partway, so he kept her on his back as he crossed the tilting bridge.

Yukina remained just ahead of the pair as she arrived at the cathedral. Using her silver spear to rend the vestiges of the vanished barrier, she leaped into the room.

Left alone within that vast room were two girls wearing identical school uniforms. Nagisa Akatsuki rested, unconscious, as Kanon Kanase held her tight.

Hazily surrounding the pair was a silver glow that resembled faint moonlight. The powerful spiritual energy Kanon was emitting coursed into Nagisa's body. However, even Kanon's powerful spiritual energy, well beyond the norm, was insufficient to make Nagisa recover. Keeping Nagisa's crumbling body intact was taking all its combined strength.

"Kanase—!"

"Kano!"

Kojou and Yukina both raced over to Kanon. Kanon's silver hair swayed as she turned her head toward them, making a frail, relieved smile. The impression given was of a girl who might vanish the moment you looked away. Her endurance was near its limits.

"Akatsuki, your wounds are healed... I'm so glad."

As Kojou squatted close by, Kanon's eyes narrowed in visible joy.

"I'm fine. More importantly, you okay, Kanase? Using power like this for Nagisa's sake—"

When Kojou touched Kanon's hand, it was as cold as ice. The Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor sleeping within Nagisa had probably robbed Kanon of her body temperature.

"Kano, get some rest. I'll take over, so—"

Yukina spoke those words as she touched Nagisa. However, Kanon gently refused.

"I'm all right... This is the only thing I can do..."

“But at this rate, Kano, even you will...”

“I’m all right. We will save Nagisa.”

As if to shield the motionless Nagisa, Kanon embraced her with both arms. Anguish came over Yukina as she lowered her hand. No doubt Yukina was well aware that she could not take Kanon’s place.

It wasn’t that Yukina was all that far behind Kanon in terms of spiritual energy strength. It was an issue of compatibility.

It just so happened that the spiritual power of the Royal Family of Aldegia, specializing in magic of ice and snow, was highly harmonious with the Beast Vassal possessing Nagisa, Alrescha Glacies. Kanon was the only one who could bolster Nagisa’s spiritual energy—

“Shit... What the hell should I do...?!”

Kojou pounded a stone wall, feeling backed into a corner.

For an instant, he considered taking her to a hospital, but Kojou immediately brushed that thought aside. A hospital could not save Nagisa. He’d known that from the beginning.

Kojou couldn’t use his vampiric abilities, either. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were nigh useless for anything other than indiscriminate destruction. That said, he couldn’t think of any way to save her.

Even while Kojou vacillated, Nagisa and Kanon grew more depleted still.

It was then that Kojou and the others noted a presence gently dropping down among them.

“—Thou mayest rest, priestess of the Valkyries. Thy duty art already fulfilled —”

Amid that empty cathedral, a songlike voice echoed. Suddenly appearing from Kojou and the others’ blind spot, and touching Kanon’s back, was the girl in the *yukata*—the vampire with blue eyes that radiated like flames.

Light faded from Kanon’s eyes. As Kanon fell into a slumber, her body gently collapsed onto the floor.

As she moved close to the fallen Kanon, Natsuki shot multiple silver chains out of thin air. The silver chains trapped the girl in the *yukata*'s limbs. However, the girl did not resist in any way.

"A witch's domain constructed in an otherworld... 'Twas quite difficult to find this place."

With chains still wrapped around her whole body, the girl smiled faintly as she surveyed the cathedral.

"Hektos... What are you doing here...?!"

After gazing up at her in a reverie for a time, Kojou finally posed that question in a raspy voice. He did not know the reason why Hektos had appeared before Kojou and the others a second time.

It was Hektos who had brought Nagisa to the site of Kojou and Aradahl's duel. Because of that, Nagisa had summoned a Beast Vassal, thus causing her to drift on the border between life and death.

But it was also she who had ensured Kanon had gone there with them. Meaning, though she had driven Nagisa into peril, Hektos had simultaneously provided a means to save Nagisa.

"— 'Tis it not obvious? To save this one."

Gazing down at Nagisa, now supported by Yukina, Hektos stated this in a quiet voice.

Still staring at the girl, Kojou slightly drew in his chin.

Hektos smiled, still bound by silver chains.

"Then let us prepare. 'Tis the time of the final Feast—"

7

Sergeant Major Spani of the North Atlantic Empire's Sorcerous Airborne Squad raised his voice and laughed as he listened to the report from the comms operator. The content of the message was that two Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military destroyers had come under attack.

“Leviathan...?! A living weapon from the Age of the Gods?! That’s the Warlord’s Empire’s Master of Serpents for you. He sure brought out the big guns!”

Spani shifted his eyes behind him, toward the sea. His squad’s current location was the mysterious artificial isle that had appeared in the environs of Itogami Island. Via high-altitude parachute drops, his squad had reached Cain’s legacy a step ahead of other nations’ landing units.

“Bursa and Crossley both unable to sail. Ducane currently in retreat.”

The comms operator, wearing headphones communicating with an orbital satellite, continued his report.

“...Well, that figures. So they’re telling us to search for the succubus controlling Leviathan?”

“A more sensible choice than war against a monster out of myth and legend, I’m sure.”

“Ha! Damn right it is.”

Spani carried his beloved machine gun as the corners of his lips curled up in delight.

They, the North Atlantic Empire’s SAS unit, had been given two orders. The first was to gather information as members of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military. The other was to race ahead of other nations in seizing sorcerous technology possessed by Itogami Island. Capturing a succubus would simultaneously achieve both objectives.

They would eliminate the threat Leviathan posed to the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military, and the North Atlantic Empire would obtain the means to control Leviathan. The plan was perfect.

Spani felt a rush of emotions as he imagined the promotion and medals awaiting his return to his home nation.

“—Corporal, can you determine the source of the succubus’s mental wave?”

Spani posed the question to a female soldier wearing a robe. She was a witch specializing in search capabilities. It was thanks to her guidance that they could

enter and move around in the mazelike artificial isle without getting lost.

“North... Roughly two kilometers... Atop a tower...”

The corporal pointed to a building in the distance. It was a steel-colored tower standing in a ruined city. Spani chuckled.

“Close. All right, have Finn’s and Coate’s squads circle around left and right. We’ll be taking the front. And keep an eye out for snipers.”

Once he issued rapid-fire orders to his subordinates, Spani began his own maneuver. The squad under Spani’s command was a mere thirteen people, but all were demons or magic users. Hence, they possessed direct striking power unavailable to any normal special forces unit. Of course, he’d prefer to avoid a head-on confrontation with Dimitrie Vattler or Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, but Spani figured he was capable of wiping the floor with a succubus and any Island Guard escorting her.

However, not even two minutes after they began walking, the somber witch called Spani to a halt.

“I have located...an incoming...craft.”

“What?!”

“Direction, ten o’clock. Range, four hundred—”

Before the witch had even finished speaking, Spani and the others were assailed by a shower of gunfire—large-caliber machine-gun rounds.

These meaninglessly shot through the ground at Spani’s and the others’ feet, forming a line. It was as if a dotted line had been punched into the ground to say *Entry Prohibited*.

“An anti-demon UFV, is it? You’ve got some interesting stuff here, don’cha?!”

Spani smirked as he caught sight of his foe.

It was a gray robot tank that had launched the attack on Spani and the others, an unmanned weapons system intended for anti-demon warfare in urban areas. One might call it a fairly effective weapon in the streets of that ruined city.

Maybe that would work on sorcerous criminals in a city district. However,

such a small craft was far too powerless to be attacking the Sorcerous Airborne Squad, able to fight a heavy tank squadron on equal terms.

Spani's subordinates moved to counterattack. The SAS's primary weapons were 20 mm barrel anti-materiel rifles and 7.62 mm electric shotguns. Employing electrum-tipped bullets, their firepower was sufficient to penetrate the robot tank's FRP armor with ease.

Black smoke blew out of the robot tank's right leg. That instant, the robot tank gave up on combat, beginning to retreat without even a glance at them. A subordinate of Spani's pumped Gatling-gun bullets into it, wrecking the poor tank. An easy win. Spani hadn't even needed to bestialize.

"Hey, now, is that it? This ain't even gonna slow us down—"

Spani felt a bit disappointed as he exhaled.

The next moment, an incredible flash of light raced before their eyes.

It was a torrent of incandescent light reminiscent of a giant blade. Piercing through the ruined city from a distance of several kilometers away, it carved a deep gully into the artificial ground. It was a laser gun of incredible might.

"What was that just now...?!"

Spani's entire body froze in fear. Even cutting-edge cruisers did not carry optical weapons of such might. And what made Spani even more afraid was that the laser attack had flown in on a path not even minutely different from that of the initial machine-gun fire. That gunfire really had been a warning shot—a warning that any further progress would be greeted with certain death.

"Sergeant Major... It's an ancient weapon! It's Kristof Gardos's...!"

He heard a scream over the communicator. Spani slowly lifted his face. Then, he confirmed with his own eyes the sight of That Which Spits Spears of Flame.

Possessing thick armor over its body, it was a creature somewhere between beast and insect, resembling no weapon system that existed in modern times. In spite of that, it conveyed an aura that was overwhelmingly malevolent.

"Those are...Nalakuvera...!"

Spani audibly clenched his teeth. Artificial monsters emerged from the steel-

colored ruined urban landscape one after another.

The Nalakuvera were protecting the succubus. The Legacy of Cain, materialized by Vattler and his cohorts, included an army of Nalakuvera as its defense force.

“This ain’t no joke! Retreat! All hands, disperse and retreat!!” Spani shouted in anger toward his subordinates.

With their beams, the creatures dyed the night sky over the ruined city red.

8

Kojou held his sleeping little sister as he walked out of the cathedral.

Yukina was strongly gripping Nagisa’s very cold hand. She was giving Nagisa the spiritual energy required to maintain her vitals.

However, this was merely an act of desperation, like using a ladle to sprinkle water over a parched desert. The spiritual energy sent over immediately faded, doing nothing to heal Nagisa. It was clear that they were only delaying the inevitable.

“Hektos...you can save Nagisa?”

Kojou posed the question toward the back of the girl in the *yukata* walking ahead of them.

Natsuki had transported the depleted Kanon to her own home for treatment. The only ones left in the Prison Barrier were the Akatsuki siblings, Yukina, and Hektos.

“Nay. ’Tis not I who shalt save this one, but thee, Kojou Akatsuki, and thy Blood Concubine.”

Looking back, the girl in the *yukata* narrowed her blue eyes as she gazed at Yukina.

Hektos’s unexpected words brought a perplexed expression over Yukina.

“What do I need to do...?”

“Come hither with Nagisa Akatsuki—”

Stripping off her lacquered clogs, Hektos descended a rock-covered hill.

Perplexed, Kojou and Yukina followed suit. The Prison Barrier was a small island artificially formed from a mass of rocks. They arrived at the water’s edge in no time. They were greeted by a desolate, sandy beach and a decrepit pier for mooring small boats. Waves from the dark surface of the sea quietly crashed against it.

“’Tis a pleasant night,” Hektos said as she gazed up at the sky.

The predawn sky glimmered with stars, and the humid tropical wind rustled her rainbow hair.

“You can do that Feast thing in a place like this?” Kojou asked in an annoyed tone.

Hektos turned to him with a smile. Her sharp canine teeth were poking out from between her lips.

“Indeed. Wherever thou and I art, it shall become the stage for the Feast—”

“H-Hektos...?!”

Kojou’s eyes widened in shock. Hektos had put a hand to the belt of her *yukata*, loosening it without a word of warning. Then, showing not even the slightest hesitation, she stripped off her clothing.

That instant, Kojou’s eyes were stolen by the sight of the girl’s pale, naked skin beneath the moonlight.

“You weren’t wearing anything under that *yukata*...?!”

“Senpai, this really is not the time,” Yukina asserted, albeit in a level tone. She was just as perplexed as he was.

Heedless of Kojou and Yukina being rooted to the spot, Hektos turned her back to them with a little twirl. Then, without the slightest pause, she entered the sea. Her confident steps drained the color from Kojou’s face.

“Is she trying to kill herself...?!”

The water had already reached Hektos’s hips. Her tiny body swayed as the

waves quietly pressed upon her. She seemed amused by this from the bottom of her heart. As she sank into the water, she straightened her slender shoulder blades; her unbound, golden hair swayed on the surface of the sea like a fish's tail.

As Kojou stared dumbfounded, Hektos's body melted and vanished before him. She had submerged into the sea.

"Senpai!"

"Got it. Take care of Nagisa—"

"Okay!"

Handing Nagisa over to Yukina, Kojou stripped off his parka. He proceeded to leap into the sea to save the sunken Hektos.

"Hektos! Where are you?!"

Kojou searched for any sign of Hektos as he violently forced his way through the waves.

The nighttime sea was dark; he could not see its bottom. When he squinted and really stared, he shuddered as he wondered just how deep she had sunk. Even so, he couldn't see Hektos anywhere.

A fair bit of time had passed since Hektos had submerged herself. Was Hektos going to simply vanish...? Just as he felt that fear gripping him, sea spray suddenly assaulted his face.

"Bwah?!"

Soaking up the unanticipated assault head-on, Kojou vigorously coughed. The pain of seawater coursing backward deep into his nose brought tears to his eyes. Hektos watched this, at first only poking her nose out of the water.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Finding the sight of Kojou thrashing about to be remarkably funny, the girl floated up and burst into laughter. It was the innocent laugh of a little girl.

Kojou was caught in a daze as he stared at this side of Hektos. He felt a dull pain deep in his chest, remembering a girl who had the very same face.

“Senpai, are you all right?” Yukina worriedly asked while she carried Nagisa over her shoulder to the withered pier.

“Somehow, yeah...”

Kojou pushed up his drenched bangs as he sighed irritably. He was extremely confused, unable to grasp Hektos’s goal.

The girl was playing in the waves without a care. Arched back, her bare breasts heaved and fell, illuminated by the moon all the while. Mysteriously, the scene did not register as indecent. It was ethereal, like something out of a European painting.

Finally tiring from swimming, Hektos gently got to her feet. As she stood up, water droplets rolled down her white flesh.

“Priestess of the sword, take my hand—”

Approaching the pier, Hektos extended her hand toward Yukina, who stood there with Nagisa still on her back. Yukina accepted Hektos’s exceedingly natural gesture.

Suddenly, Hektos made a leering grin, forcefully pulling Yukina close.

“—Hyaaaa?!”

Artificial facsimile that she was, Hektos was still a vampire. Unable to resist her strength, Yukina lost her balance and fell into the sea. Naturally, the same went for Nagisa. A very large pillar of water rose up, with the three girls intertwined as they floated back to the sea’s surface.

“Himeragi! Nagisa! Hektos, why, you— What are you thinking?!”

After confirming that Yukina and Nagisa were safe, Kojou ran at Hektos. As he got close, she wrapped her arms around his neck. His mouth fell open at the sensation of her naked breasts against him, and Hektos watched, observing him with a mischievous smile.

“Do not stir, Kojou. Lend thine ears to the wind, sense the warmth of the Sea Mother. Thou art king. The whole of the world is thy blood, thy vassal. Strip away thy boorish garments.”

“Hektos...?”

“Alrescha Glacies, the twelfth Beast Vassal, rests within this one. Thou knowest this much?”

“Y-yeah.”

Hektos’s question drew a nod from Kojou.

Naturally, Kojou, too, knew the reason behind the abnormality occurring in his little sister’s body. On that day—on the night Kojou shot the Twelfth, Avrora—Nagisa accepted Avrora’s soul, and her Beast Vassal, into herself. The great power as a spirit medium she had possessed since birth had made that possible.

In the momentary gap between Kojou destroying the previous Fourth Primogenitor and becoming the new one, Nagisa had altered Avrora’s fate. Avrora’s soul, which should have been consumed by Kojou, had been snatched away by Nagisa, saving Avrora from annihilation.

“Saving the life of Nagisa Akatsuki... ’Tis simple. Thou needst only strip the twelfth Beast Vassal from her.”

Pulling away from Kojou, Hektos drew closer to Nagisa as the latter floated on the water’s surface. Her white fingertips undid the ribbon of Nagisa’s uniform. Nagisa’s white neck poked out from the uniform’s open collar. Her blue veins stood out against her white, blood-deprived flesh.

“Now I get it... I just have to take the Beast Vassal that’s possessing her for myself...”

The exceptionally simple answer made Kojou put a hand over his own eyes.

From the back of his throat, a dry laugh trickled forth. The entire reason Nagisa was on the brink of death was because she, a mere human, had a “monster” dwelling inside her—a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. So all he had to do was return it to its rightful place. Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor, needed only to consume it.

But it was Nagisa herself who rejected that answer.

“Kojou...you can’t...”

The supposedly comatose Nagisa faintly opened her eyes, weakly shaking her head left to right.

“Nagisa, you’re conscious again...?”

“If you do that, Miss Aurora will vanish... This time...for good...”

“However, should Nagisa Akatsuki expire, Dodekatos shalt as well,” Hektos whispered into his ear as Kojou sucked in a breath.

Staring at the unnaturally pale face of his little sister, Kojou clenched his teeth. If he released the twelfth Beast Vassal, the soul of Aurora that was its seal would dissipate. It was something he’d known from the start.

“Do I have to...kill Aurora...again...?”

Kojou’s hands fiercely shook. It was with those hands that Kojou had once shot Aurora.

And this time, the decision to rob her of her very soul pressed upon him. He knew this was against Nagisa’s wishes, but there was no other way to save her —

“Nay—”

As Kojou anguished, Hektos wrapped her tiny hands around his fingers. Lifting his face in surprise, Hektos smiled as she gazed back into his eyes.

“Dodekatos shall not perish, for she is our hope.”

“Hope?”

“Indeed. Accordingly, it is I who must perish—”

As the perplexed Kojou stared at her, Hektos shifted her gaze before his eyes. It fell upon the sight of Yukina, standing still and drenched. Hektos turned to face her, drawing her face close enough to share each other’s breaths.

“Priestess of the sword—first companion to the fourth of the primogenitors till the end of time. I entrust my Beast Vassal to thee.”

“Eh?”

Yukina’s body went rigid as Hektos wrapped both arms around her. It was the kind of gentle act of affection reserved for one’s child. Then, Hektos drew her lips close to Yukina’s ear. In a faint voice, she whispered something to her. Yukina’s eyes burst open in shock.

“...!”

Trembling, Yukina stared at her. Hektos nibbled on Yukina’s right ear.

“Hektos! What are you planning to do with Himeragi...?! ”

Kojou hurriedly raced over to the pair. Looking back at the nervous Kojou, Hektos smiled with delight. She readily let Yukina go, this time to be embraced by Kojou instead.

“Fear not. Mine blood and soul now belong to thee.”

Speaking those words with sweet, upturned eyes, Hektos undid the buttons of Kojou’s uniform. Gently pressing her hand to Kojou’s newly exposed chest, she buried her face into his neck. Kojou grimaced as he shuddered in naked pleasure. She was licking him.

“H...Hektos...get off! Himeragi’s... Himeragi’s watching, so...”

“’Tis fine. Allow others to behold our revelry—incidentally, thine little sister as well,” Hektos said suggestively with a glance toward Nagisa.

The eyes of the supposedly unconscious Nagisa had opened wide once more. Surely it was not Kojou’s imagination that her eyes glowed blue.

“Awaken, Dodekatos...nay, the Twelfth, Aurora. For if thou dost not, he shalt be mine.”

Hektos thrust her fangs into Kojou’s neck. With an eager sound, her tongue lapped up the fresh blood that flowed forth. As Nagisa’s eyes beheld this, a glint of powerful emotion resembling jealousy came to rest in her eyes. An icy Siren wavered as it floated in midair—an illusion of Aurora’s Beast Vassal.

“Very good, Dodekatos...,” Hektos quietly murmured as she continued to touch Kojou’s neck.

“Hektos...don’t tell me...you’re...!”

Kojou gasped and looked down at her. He’d realized her intent.

A powerful hunger and thirst struck him. He felt a powerful urge to drink the blood of the vampire girl in his arms. This, too, was Hektos’s doing. She had sipped Kojou’s blood to awaken his instincts as a vampire.

“Ask thyself, Kojou Akatsuki. When thou fought Root during the Blazing Feast, why didst Enatos and Pemptos take thy and Dodekatos’s side...?”

“...?!”

The question shocked him.

Certainly, that pair had lent him their aid when Kojou had challenged Root, the genuine Fourth Primogenitor, in combat. The Beast Vassals had defied their host and master, Root, of their own will.

“Because in Dodekatos, we see our hope.”

Hektos defenselessly exposed her own neck before Kojou. Drawn toward it, Kojou plunged his fangs into her neck. Her delicate body trembled as she, sounding satisfied, continued her words.

“Among us dolls, living with our Beast Vassals for an eternity, yearning for our own destruction, only she... Only Dodekatos desireth to live. It is with thee she wishes to live in this world, together—”

Hektos’s Blood Memory flowed inside Kojou.

These girls, the twelve Kaleid Bloods, were created as avatars—mere dolls within which to seal the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

When the seal of a Beast Vassal was released, their avatars of flesh became empty vessels. However, Hektos had never unleashed her own Beast Vassal even once in all that time. Her Beast Vassal remained sealed.

If Kojou was to consume Hektos’s soul in that state, all that would remain would be a husk. This was her true objective—and her desire.

“Dodekatos...my beloved, final sister. I bequeath this final flesh of mine to thee—accept it,” Hektos gently called out to Nagisa.

Then Kojou heard a solemn chant echo forth.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

“Himeragi...?!”

Yukina, standing to his left, raised a hand high as she stared at Nagisa, hovering on the surface of the sea.

The ring on Yukina's ring finger glowed crimson. This was the ring sealing the pact between Kojou and Yukina—the sorcerous device crafted from Kojou's rib. Through the spiritual pathway thus formed, Kojou's demonic energy coursed into Yukina.

“Come forth, Beast Vassal Number Six, Minelauva Iris—!”

Responding to Yukina's summons, what manifested was a knight clad in iridescent armor—a Valkyrie. Enormous wings of fire spread from her back, and her hand gripped a long sword that radiated golden light.

The rainbow Valkyrie's sword of light swept forth, across Nagisa, floating in the water, and the Siren of ice both.

Minelauva Iris was the Beast Vassal of Severing; its sword of light severed not only matter but also the laws of fate. It severed the phenomenon of Nagisa being possessed by Avrora. The two souls yoked together had been slashed apart.

Released from Nagisa's spiritual energy, the twelfth Beast Vassal returned to its proper place—in other words, to a vessel for sealing a Beast Vassal, the body of the sixth Kaleid Blood.

All signs of the Beast Vassals had vanished.

The nighttime sea returned to calm once more.

The rainbow-haired girl within Kojou's arms made quiet sounds of sleep. What came over her lips was a satisfied smile, taking visible pride in her victory.

Using her very own body, she had resurrected Avrora. That had been Hektos's desire. Kojou knew this, for she had entrusted him with her Blood Memory. Her wish had been granted.

“Hektos...”

He spoke the name of the girl who was no longer with them.

As the girl drifted into slumber, the faint twinkle of the predawn sky shone brightly against the side of her face.

From atop a tower built in a ruined city, Yume Eguchi gazed at the sea.

A slender, serpentine tail was poking out from the hem of her school uniform's skirt. Translucent wings woven from demonic energy spread forth from her back. Using the power of Lilith—the World's Mightiest Succubus—Yume was communicating with Leviathan.

As she did so, a thin mist rose up directly behind her.

The mist gradually became denser, transforming into a man wearing a military uniform. His face was unfamiliar. He was an assailant—a vampire of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military.

“I've found you, succubus—!”

As Yume turned around, fear plain on her face, the vampire man trained a rifle on her. He was a special forces soldier dispatched to eliminate the succubus.

With Leviathan blocking the way at Yume's beck and call, the HGTO Military armada was unable to close with Itogami Island. The two escort ships engaged in forward reconnaissance had been sent packing with their tails between their legs. After all, Leviathan was a living weapon from the Age of the Gods. At the very least, humanity possessed no weapon that could oppose it in undersea combat.

Accordingly, the HGTO had issued an order to its soldiers: Eliminate the succubus controlling Leviathan.

But before the rifle could fire a single round, a huge beast appeared in front of Yume. It was a steel golem about four to five meters tall.

“Anmauth!”

Emerging to shield Yume was a young silver-haired man, ordering his golem to attack.

“Urk...!”

The vampire soldier summoned his own Beast Vassal as well. This was an imposing bull, its entire body engulfed in flames—a will-o'-the-wisp. However, the steel golem swung a fist downward, pulverizing the head of the bull in a

single blow.

“Tobias Jagan?! Damn you, you lend a lowly succubus your aid—?!”

The vampire soldier half screamed while shouting abuse at Jagan. Likely, he was a vampire of the Warlord’s Empire, the same as Jagan. As the First Primogenitor was part of the HGTO, Jagan’s actions in opposition to the organization were tantamount to treason against his primogenitor.

However, Jagan smiled coldly at that soldier with obvious scorn.

“Stop yapping, you lowly Holy Ground Treaty Organization mutt—!”

Jagan’s steel golem seized hold of the vampire soldier. It proceeded to crush the soldier’s torso and violently slam him into the ground.

Even so, the soldier was alive, vampiric undeath at work. That said, he had already lost all strength with which to continue fighting. He changed his form into a grimy mist and began to retreat.

At virtually the same time, incredible explosions erupted all over the ruins. These were from Nalakuvera gunnery attacks. The Nalakuvera under Lydianne’s remote control seemed to be driving the vampire soldier’s unit off.

“You two runts safe?” Jagan asked gruffly, turning toward Yume, who stood rooted to the spot. His choice of words was rude, but he *was* technically showing concern for them.

“As expected, most splendid, Count Jagan.”

Lydianne, piloting her crimson robot tank, called out from a nearby plateau. Even during that time, the Nalakuvera’s attacks continued. This no doubt meant a considerable number of units had been aiming at Yume.

“I am sorry to make you do all this for my sake.”

Yume bowed her head to Jagan.

Oddly, she sensed no fear from having people after her life. That was likely a product of her past experiences. Right after Yume’s power as a succubus awakened, family members and friends had been bathed in it, engendering ugly, repulsive emotions that far outstripped mere bloodlust.

“Cease the servile phraseology. It vexes me,” Jagan replied. Although he acted sour, his voice felt unexpectedly kind.

“It is because His Excellency Vattler acknowledges your power as the Witch of the Night that he commanded me to protect you. Though I do feel somewhat deprived facing only bottom-feeders such as the one from a moment ago.”

“R-right.”

Yume nodded and broke into a little smile. She knew Jagan was trying to praise her in his own way.

Yume had people who would protect her now. That was why she wanted to protect them in turn—and to protect the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island in which dwelled the people who had aided and accepted her.

“But do not lower your guard. We are only using Leviathan until the primogenitors come out. If they come out, run immediately. If you don’t, you’ll die. You and Leviathan both.”

“U-understood, Tobias.”

“Tobias...?!”

Jagan’s facial features, sharp as a drawn knife, twitched and slightly wavered at hearing the girl call him by his first name. Reflexively, he opened his mouth to lodge some kind of complaint but turned his face without saying a word.

Having returned to the top of the tower, Lydianne asked, “...*So Sir Vattler doth truly intend to fight the primogenitors?*”

“Of course,” came Jagan’s immediate reply. “That’s why His Excellency desired this battle.”

Yume felt a twinge of unease as she lowered her eyes. Having obtained the knowledge of The Cleansing, Vattler’s power probably rivaled that of the primogenitors. The emergence of power that surpassed the primogenitors’ meant the loss of the global balance underpinned by the three Dominions.

“*A new age of war ariseth, then? Well, this be not my personal concern but... art thou truly fine with this, Lady Empress?*” Lydianne murmured as if speaking only to herself.

In the silence, Yume felt like she heard mocking laughter in her ear.

“Keh-keh...”

10

Dragging their tired, sluggish bodies, Kojou and Yukina returned to the sandy shore.

Kojou laid down Hektos, and Yukina laid Nagisa, upon dry rocks.

“Kojou...is Miss Avrora...?”

Nagisa asked in a voice on the verge of vanishing. Even if she'd awoken from her coma, her depleted endurance was yet to return. Even so, warmth had returned to her skin, and her cheeks had grown faintly pink. Freed from Avrora's possession, she was apparently able to supply herself with spiritual energy.

“Don't worry. She's right here.”

Kojou put Nagisa's hand atop the still-sleeping Hektos. Inside Hektos rested Avrora's soul. Nagisa must have understood this, for she smiled weakly.

“I see... Sorry, Kojou... It's my fault she...”

Her lips quivered. *“Sorry.”* Her eyes closed once more.

“Nagisa? Hey...?!”

Kojou couldn't help being worried at the sight of his little sister falling unresponsive. Yukina put a hand upon Nagisa's chest and determined it was rising and falling in an easy rhythm.

“It is all right. She's only sleeping. More importantly, senpai, you should put some clothes on her.”

“R-right...”

Kojou picked up his parka from where he had left it on some rocks and handed it to Yukina. She gently set it on top of the girl who was once Hektos. Meanwhile, Kojou picked up the clogs that Hektos had kicked off.

“‘Tis not I who shalt save this one,” Hektos had said. But she’d lied. Kojou had done nothing. It was indeed Hektos who had saved Nagisa and Avrora both. As Avrora slept, Kojou placed the clogs beside her, murmuring a small thank-you.

“Come to think of it, you all right, Himeragi? Summoning a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor and all that...”

“Miss Hektos loaned me her power. Besides, I am senpai’s Blood Bride, after all...,” Yukina said, touching her left ring finger without realizing it. Then, for some reason, her very own words seemed to make her cheeks redden.

“Ah, erm, I don’t mean *bride* as in a wife, but in a pure, magic-related sense...”

“Yeah, I get it. You don’t need to put any special emphasis on it like that.”

“*Haaah*... I...see. Is that so?”

When Kojou casually replied, Yukina glared at him with half-lidded eyes as she raised a voice that was suddenly sour. Kojou did not notice this as he gazed at Nagisa’s and Avrora’s sleeping faces with a conflicted expression.

“For the time being, we’d best get these two to a hospital—”

“Yes. I am concerned for Kano as well.”

“That said, no choice but to wait till Natsuki comes back, huh? Himeragi, aren’t you feeling cold wearing that?”

“No, why would.....? Wearing *what*?”

Yukina began to smile and shake her head, but she stopped and suddenly seemed confused. Realizing where Kojou was staring, she gasped and covered her own breasts. Yukina’s seawater-drenched school uniform clung tightly to her skin, making the curves of her body, and the lines of her underwear, highly visible through the fabric.

“Just where were you looking while you said that?!”

“Wait a— I’m just worried about you!”

“Ugh... Fine. I was already well aware senpai was that kind of person.”

Her cheeks still puffed out in a pout, Yukina circled around Kojou’s back. Then, she drew her body against his back. The touch of her skin against his back made

Kojou unwittingly straighten his posture.

“H-Himeragi?”

“I thought so. You are rather cold, aren’t you?”

“Er, I’m not really...”

“This being the case, I believe warming each other kills two birds with one stone. Also, this way, I will not have senpai’s indecent eyes watching me.”

“Hey, wait a...”

Even though Kojou’s lips twisted, he made no further retort; he realized this was Yukina’s way of being considerate toward him.

Certainly, they had saved Nagisa and Avrora—but only because Hektos had sacrificed herself. Kojou could not save her. That fact tormented him.

Though, if Hektos saw Kojou like that, she’d probably smile. It wasn’t like she was dead. Hektos’s Blood Memory was inside Kojou. The same went for December and all the other Kaleid Bloods.

Kojou had to keep on living while bearing their memories on his shoulders. That was the destiny—and the curse—of a vampire primogenitor.

And a vampire’s Blood Concubine was the one who shared the burden of that curse with him—Yukina’s warmth, conveyed through Kojou’s back, was teaching him this.



“Y-Yukina...”

Suddenly, behind Kojou and Yukina, something fell to the ground.

Now on the sandy beach was a black instrument case. The eyes of the girl who had been carrying it bulged so wide, staring at Kojou and Yukina, it seemed like they might fall out of their sockets. It was a girl with a refined face with her long hair tied up in a ponytail. Her lips quivered in shock as she glared at Kojou.

“Kojou Akatsuki...! What are you making Yukina do, you Pervogenitor, youuu...?!”

“K-Kirasaka?”

“Sayaka? What are you doing here...?!”

Kojou and Yukina called out the girl’s name in surprise. Even so, seeing the two cuddled together, Sayaka’s mouth could only flap open and closed. She was too angry to speak.

“Tee-hee... It would seem you are all having an enjoyable evening.”

A silver-haired girl wearing a ceremonial military uniform smiled past Sayaka’s shoulder. Her eyes, beholding the lying Nagisa and Aurora, glimmered inquisitively.

“There were, um, various circumstances... Um, how’d you know we were here, La Folia? Weren’t you on Vattler’s ship?”

“I was searching for you, Kojou. However, first, let us give these girls some rest. Justina, take these two to the *Böðvildr*—”

The silver-haired Aldegian princess ordered her subordinate to collect Nagisa and Aurora. “As you command,” replied the female knight, appearing out of thin air as she picked up both.

Kojou suddenly realized that there was an enormous armored airship floating silently above their heads.

With a slender wire wrapped around her, Justina was still carrying the pair of girls as she fluttered, hoisted up to the airship. She seemed less like a ninja than a stage magician.

“...So what do you want with me, La Folia?”

Feeling a slight headache, Kojou looked back toward the princess.

“You know the circumstances under which this island is currently placed, Kojou?”

For once, La Folia posed her question in a very serious tone.

“The highlights, yeah. Asagi intends to fight that Holy Ground Treaty Organization Military, right?”

“Yes. Skirmishes with its vanguard appear to have already begun. Nalakuvera have driven back the landing force, and Leviathan has damaged a number of warships of the multinational armada.”

“Leviathan... You cannot mean—Yume?” Yukina murmured.

“Oh...that’s right, Asagi already analyzed the Nalakuvera control commands way back...”

Kojou clutched his head. Not only had Asagi joined hands with Vattler, she’d even assembled her own combat strength to fight the HGTO Military.

La Folia mixed a sigh in with her nod.

“As a result, the Priestess of Cain has prevented the one-sided destruction of Itogami Island at the Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s hands. However, that is not the crux of the problem.”

“There’s still more...?”

“For better or worse, the Holy Ground Treaty is a system backed by the martial might of its Three Pillars, the primogenitors. However, here on the current Itogami Island, there is one who has obtained power rivaling the primogenitors via the Memory of The Cleansing.”

“Vattler...,” Kojou grumbled with a click of his tongue.

“Correct,” said the silver-haired princess with a smile, spreading both arms wide. It was as if she was dividing the world into halves. “And he has formed an alliance with the Holy Ground Treaty non-signatory nations, securing their support. As a result, the world has been split into two opposing camps with

Itogami Island placed at the center.”

“Are you saying Itogami Island shall be the trigger for a war?” Yukina asked, voice tense.

La Folia nodded. “Yes, an enormous war on a global scale at that. To avert this, the Holy Ground Treaty Organization has no choice but to field the greatest of its combat strength to destroy Itogami Island—in other words, the three primogenitors.”

“Oh... Vattler, he...” Sweat slid down Kojou’s back. “He intends to fight the primogenitors?! That’s what he wanted Asagi’s cooperation for...?!”

“Yes. This is a global war involving all the primogenitors...a war of the primogenitors.”

Yukina quietly repeated the surreal words. “A war of the primogenitors...”

“Can’t we make them stop this war?” Kojou asked.

He closed the distance with La Folia. The silver-haired princess watched him as a beautiful smile appeared on her lips. Somehow, that smiling face of a pureblood schemer felt like something he could depend on.

“That depends upon your decisions, Kojou. Let us be off.”

“My...decisions?”

Kojou blinked, eyes widening as he stared at the princess. La Folia elegantly turned on her heels, bringing her bodyguard, Sayaka, along as she walked off. Kojou and Yukina shared a perplexed glance.

“La Folia? Er, be off to...where—?” Kojou asked the departing princess.

La Folia halted her steps, her silver hair fluttering as she looked back at him.

The water’s horizon began to glimmer, forming a tear between the worlds of light and darkness.

With that scarlet radiance at her back, La Folia solemnly spoke to Kojou.

“To the Garden of Whispers—the Holy Ground Treaty Organization’s High Council.”



CHAPTER FIVE
EMPIRE OF THE DAWN

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EMPIRE OF THE DAWN

1

La Folia was taking Kojou and the others to Keystone Gate in a black limousine arranged in advance. This was the fifth artificial isle, placed at the center of Itogami Island. Not only was it the headquarters of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, the enormous structure also housed offices, large-scale commercial facilities, and even high-class hotels. The princess was bringing Kojou and Yukina to a corner close to the uppermost stratum, high-class lodging reserved for foreign VIPs.

“So you have come, Kojou Akatsuki.”

At the back of the suite, constructed with a frightening degree of extravagance, a man wearing an old-style coat was awaiting Kojou—a vampire with long black hair.

“Velesh Aradah!...?”

This reunion with a most unexpected individual made Kojou reflexively enter a fighting stance. He’d engaged this opponent in a spectacular duel a mere half a day prior. Awkward didn’t even cover it.

“Wait, you’re healed already?”

“...There is no need for concern. It is my kin of the Warlord’s Empire who fanned the flames of that duel, after all. I have no intention of acknowledging defeat, but I am not minded to blame you at this late hour.”

With an expression just as strained as his own, Aradah! motioned Kojou to a chair. Yukina seemed on edge as she watched his and Kojou’s awkward conversation. La Folia was oddly amused for some reason.

“You knew about the Legacy of Cain?” Kojou asked, putting a hand to his own temple. It was already plain why Aradahl had seen Glenda as a threat. It was not Glenda herself but the Legacy of Cain under her protection that he feared. By Vattler’s hand, the Legacy had been restored, making the menace to the Holy Ground Treaty Organization a reality.

“I merely acted in accordance with the HGTO’s will. Naturally, even I did not know the true nature of the Legacy. To be blunt, Vattler knowing how to correctly employ the Dragon of the Swamp demonstrates just how badly both the HGTO and I miscalculated.”

“Vattler, he’s been setting up a war with the primogenitors, hasn’t he?”

“So it would seem.”

Aradahl recrossed his legs in visible irritation.

“The primogenitors cannot remain aloof if there is a global-scale war, after all. No doubt he intends to employ the Legacy of Cain as bait to draw them onto the battlefield. That is very much his manner of thinking.”

“I’m not about to let things go the way that bastard wants,” Kojou declared, leaning forward.

Aradahl exhaled with an icy expression. “If you wish to stop the war, destroy Itogami Island this instant. Surely your Beast Vassals can accomplish this.”

“—That’s even worse, dammit! I’m saying I wanna protect the people living on Itogami Island! If it was your turf, you’d say the same thing!”

“.....”

Aradahl opened his mouth for a rebuttal but sank into silence instead. For some reason, Kojou voicing the word *turf* brought out a gaze of deep interest.

“—Chairman Aradahl. Do you recall the wager you made with me?”

La Folia giggled as she asked. Aradahl grudgingly nodded.

“Though I am tempted to say the conclusion of the duel being muddled voids the wager, I shall bow to your courage and sagacity. Come, Kojou Akatsuki. Princess, you also. This way.”

Rising to his feet, Aradahl acted as the silver-haired princess's escort, bringing her to an adjacent room. Kojou guardedly followed suit. There stood a small study for the use of guests.

Sayaka, the princess's bodyguard, and Yukina waited in front of the entrance to the room.

A single chair had been placed at the center of the dimly lit room. It was an old, metal-constructed chair that seemed like a torture device from the Middle Ages. The armrests had metal manacles attached, and the back of the chair was cramped full of creepy magical symbols carved into it.

"...What's this?" Kojou grimaced.

"It is a sorcerous device from our primogenitor," Aradahl answered. "It is a gate through which one reaches the Garden of Whispers."

"It's a gate? So if I use this, I'll be able to speak to the HGTO's High Council?"

"Yes."

While Kojou stared in half disbelief, Aradahl maintained his calm explanation.

"The High Council comprises twelve representatives, three from permanent member nations and nine from nonpermanent member nations. They debate and determine HGTO policy. If you can persuade a majority of councillors, you will surely be able to bring this war to an end."

"A majority of twelve... Meaning I have to get a minimum of seven on my side?"

"That it does. But they have already decided to invade Itogami Island. Making them overturn that decision will not be a simple operation. No doubt each of the councillors surely has various thoughts on the matter."

Aradahl's words caused Kojou's face to contort in despair. Even Kojou, with a threadbare grasp of politics, knew that national decision-making was underpinned by the weighing of various pros and cons. Furthermore, this time, they'd gone as far as to put each nation's militaries into motion. Just thinking of the time and expense required to dispatch a multinational armada made it easy for Kojou to envision how difficult persuading the Council would be.

“Is there no other way the Council reaches its decisions, Chairman Aradah!?”

La Folia offered him some water nonchalantly. Aradah!’s face grew more grudging still.

“Veto.”

“Veto?”

“The High Council’s permanent members are the representatives of the three Dominions—in other words, the vampire primogenitors. These vampire primogenitors have been granted the right to veto matters before the Council.”

“...So if any of the primogenitors are against something, the High Council’s decision gets thrown back in its face?”

Kojou’s expression brightened. He thought his chances of getting a primogenitor to act on a whim were higher than being able to convince seven other nations’ representatives.

“Do not expect things to be so convenient. Vampire primogenitors are beings with even more time on their hands than Vattler. I do not think they will give up on a golden opportunity for war so easily. If you can offer terms that genuinely please them, that would be another matter, but—”

Speaking these words, Aradah! seemed to be prompting Kojou to sit in the chair. Hardening his resolve as he took a deep breath, Kojou sat upon the seat’s cold surface. The metallic manacles snapped on him of their own will, firmly locking Kojou’s wrists in place. The subsequent coursing of demonic energy caused the symbols on the back to begin to glow.

“From this point on, you are the only one permitted to speak. This is all the aid I have to offer.”

As she stated this, La Folia’s form began to grow white and hazy. Mist began to hover around Kojou.

“Nah, this is plenty. I owe you one, La Folia.”

As he called out to the princess, even Kojou’s own words felt distant. Yukina and Aradah!, supposedly there in the same room with him, had become virtually invisible.

“Do remember one thing, Kojou. Remember who and what you are—”

La Folia’s voice was like a whisper as it gradually vanished.

When his vision cleared, Kojou was standing in an unfamiliar garden.

2

It was unclear how far the white marble passage extended. It seemed endless. A hedge of rosebushes surrounded him, and the branches of giant trees, whose names he knew not, formed what acted like a roof above his head.

This twilight world, at the border between day and night, was enveloped by a golden-glowing mist. Kojou only knew of a single place that greatly resembled that chamber—Natsuki Minamiya’s Prison Barrier. This, too, was likely an artificial otherworld constructed through magic.

This was the Garden of Whispers of which La Folia had spoken—the meeting place for the High Council of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization.

“Welcome, Fourth Primogenitor.”

He heard a voice from within the mist.

He could not determine the speaker’s gender. The voice was hushed, like a whisper.

Kojou suddenly realized he was standing before a huge, round table.

The round table was set with twelve chairs. All the participants seated upon them were hiding their faces behind silver masks. These were the twelve councillors who governed the HGTO.

“How long has it been since someone stepped into this garden unbidden—?”

A voice came from behind Kojou. The hard expressions on the masked councillors put Kojou on edge. Not being able to see the other person’s face made them feel several times more intimidating.

“Though we cannot give a warm reception, let us hear his words, in deference to the lords who have sent these missives.”

“Missives?”

Kojou looked back as he pursued the issue. One of the mask-wearing councillors lifted a triple-sealed scroll.

“La Folia Rihavein of the kingdom of Aldegia, Iblisveil Aziz of the Fallen Dynasty, and Velesh Aradahl, chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire—each of these people have vouched for your status.”

“It would be best if you do not betray our expectations.”

“...Got it. I’ll get to the point.”

Internally thanking La Folia and company, Kojou got his ragged breathing in order. She and the others had made appeals to the HGTO in places unknown to Kojou. He certainly couldn’t betray their expectations.

“I have only one demand. Hands off Itogami Island. Take back that junk about recognizing it as a large-scale destructive sorcerous device and pull back the multinational armada, right now.”

“We reject your demand.”

The director’s reply was swift.

“The matter of Itogami Island’s destruction has already been settled. We will not overturn our decision.”

“This might become a huge global war because of it, you know?!” Kojou yelled, voice ragged.

Cold laughter trickled out from various parts of the round table.

“Does thy own statement not demonstrate the danger of the sorcerous device called Itogami Island?”

“If we eliminate Itogami Island, we erase the menace of The Cleansing. The Holy Ground Treaty non-signatory nations will have no further reason to oppose us.”

“In other words, the swift destruction of Itogami Island will eliminate all obstacles in the way of world peace.”

“Don’t take me for an idiot!” Kojou stamped his foot upon the marble floor.

“Using The Cleansing, wrapping the Holy Ground Treaty non-signatory nations into this, all of it is Vattler’s doing. If you’re starting a war, you’re just playing into his hands, aren’t you?!”

“We have issued an arrest warrant for Dimitrie Vattler.”

A new voice coolly made the statement. “He is a vampire of the Warlord’s Empire—a Holy Ground Treaty signatory nation. Accordingly, the HGTO Military shall carry out his arrest, a most natural course of events.”

“If you’re gonna attack Itogami Island come hell or high water, you’re making an enemy of me, too.”

Kojou twisted his lips as he spoke. If Kojou joined hands with Vattler, who possessed the Legacy of Cain, the primogenitor-allied HGTO would not escape unscathed. Even if he couldn’t protect Itogami Island, he could surely inflict immense damage upon the multinational armada.

Even so, the councillors were left unconvinced.

“You are free to do as you please, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“You are no threat to us.”

“Are thy assertions at an end?”

Then leave, they were all saying.

“Looks like you’ve got no intention of changing your decision no matter what...”

Kojou’s shoulders trembled in anger. He thought of simply summoning a Beast Vassal and blowing the entire garden apart. But that would likely be futile. This was a barrier constructed in an otherworld. Just like the Prison Barrier, Kojou wouldn’t be able to use his Beast Vassals there.

So this is it, thought Kojou, biting his lip in despair. That instant...

“...Do remember one thing, Kojou...”

The silver-haired princess’s final words rose in the back of his mind.

“Haaah...,” went the breath trickling out of Kojou’s throat.

“So it’s come to this, ha-ha...,” he said, his voice changing decisively to

laughter. Kojou shuddered as if his abdomen was spasming; the lungs from which he had exhaled were gasping for air. Kojou had burst into laughter.

Through their masks, the councillors gazed dumbfounded at the sight of Kojou continuing to laugh.

“So that’s it, La Folia... So that’s how it is... I didn’t need to ‘negotiate’ in the first place.”

“You will refrain from unclear remarks, Fourth Primogenitor...!”

One of the councillors spoke in a vivid display of irritation.

“Yeah, sorry.” The corners of Kojou’s lips were still curled up through the apology. “Incidentally, I have a question... On this Garden of Whispers Council, it’s only the vampire primogenitors who are given veto rights?”

“...That is a fact,” a masked councillor spoke gravely.

“Based on the provisions in the Holy Ground Treaty, the vampire primogenitors have been granted the right of veto for debates concerning crucial matters.”

“Well, then,” said Kojou, nodding with satisfaction. “That makes this simple. I’m exercising my veto on the attack against Itogami Island...*as a vampire primogenitor.*”

“What...?”

Murmurs arose. The air inside the garden shifted. He did not hear an instant rebuttal like those he had heard up to that moment. Kojou’s instantaneous idea had caught them by surprise.

“...I see. So that is your card, Kojou Akatsuki.”

One of the councillors seated at the round table broke into laughter that sounded almost like a *hee-hee*. Somehow, even while maintaining pronounced dignity, the laughing voice sounded...playful.

Without warning, she removed her silver mask. Light-green, almost emerald, hair flowed down her shoulders. Her large eyes were like deep lakes of jade. She was a beautiful girl, lovely yet powerful, reminiscent of a wild leopard.

“Giada... Right, you’re one of the standing members...!” Kojou exclaimed.

This was the Third Primogenitor, she who ruled the Chaos Zone, a Dominion of Central America—Giada Kukulkin. One of the three primogenitors proper, she grinned at Kojou in amusement.

“Certainly, the provisions of the Holy Ground Treaty stipulate that *only the vampire primogenitors hold veto rights*. Nowhere is it written that the primogenitors number only three. Accordingly, the matter is quite clear.”

Giada giggled, her eyes narrowing. The murmurs within the garden grew larger still.

“Then—”

“But we cannot accept this, Kojou Akatsuki. You are yet unworthy of claiming the mantle of fourth primogenitor.”

“I’m...not enough...?”

Giada said to Kojou, “He who would call himself primogenitor must rule a Dominion of his own. However, you have no territory, do you?” she provoked.

Kojou groaned, clenching both fists. Of course, Kojou, no more than a high schooler on paper, could not possibly have his own territory. That went without saying. Giada surely knew as much. *So why?* thought Kojou. *What’s the reason for that expression? It’s like she’s testing me some—*

“Territory, huh...? I have a territory.”

Concealing his doubts, Kojou opened his mouth.

Giada raised an eyebrow. “And where is it?”

“Whaddaya think I came here for? *Itogami Island is my territory.*”

“Hmmm.”

Giada’s smile deepened. Kojou could not look away from her.

“The Japanese government relinquished its territorial rights on Itogami Island as a member of the HGTO, right? Then there’s no one to complain about me taking it over.”

“Even if ’twere so, what of the Legacy of Cain?”

“If you see that as part of Itogami Island, then I’m taking it, too, of course. The Priestess of Cain is one of my people.”

“Certainly, it is you who protected the Dragon of the Swamp, Guardian of the Legacy, from Aradahl. The logic is workable.”

Giada’s eyes gently narrowed. The remaining eleven councillors listened to the exchange between her and Kojou without a word. This time, if Kojou showed a single opening, the councillors, Giada included, would no doubt remove him from the garden. Kojou appreciated anew just how much weight Giada’s words carried as a primogenitor.

“However, you do not rule that island in actuality, do you?”

That same Giada nonchalantly pointed that out. Kojou gasped, eyes widening.

“In other words, if I kick Vattler out of Itogami Island, you’ll acknowledge me as a primogenitor?”

“’Tis because Itogami Island is the altar for The Cleansing that we view it as dangerous. Should you defeat Vattler, he who has seized The Cleansing for himself, we shall have no reason to fear Itogami Island any longer.”

There was venom in Giada’s grin as she spoke those words.

Aradahl had said to “offer terms that please the primogenitors.” This meant a fight between Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor, and Vattler, who’d obtained the power of The Cleansing. This truly was something primogenitors with too much time on their hands wanted to see.

And Kojou was destined to fight Vattler either way.

Vattler had made use of the Legacy of Cain, forced HGTO Military troops to withdraw, and was trying to start a war. As long as he remained, Itogami Island would never be at peace.

“The menace of The Cleansing being eliminated without the depletion of our own troops is a benefit to the HGTO. I believe there is room to consider the Fourth Primogenitor’s request. What say you?” Giada posed the question to the eleven councillors.

“...We assent to your terms.”

Voices rose one after another from the round table. They had no reason to reject Giada's proposal, either.

"The HGTO Military has already begun combat maneuvers. It cannot leisurely wait for the Fourth Primogenitor to seize the right to rule Itogami Island."

"The multinational armada shall commence its attack on Itogami Island twelve hours hence. Only if effective rule is obtained over Itogami Island within that time shall we recognize the Fourth Primogenitor's right of veto."

"So a grace period of twelve hours to send Vattler packing."

Kojou surveyed the masked councillors as he bared his small fangs.

"Works for me."

3

The Legacy of Cain was an artificial isle composed of over six hundred individual modules.

The size of an individual module was exactly the same size as one of the gigafloats comprising Itogami Island. These were leisurely connected together, spreading out like a spiral as they surrounded Itogami Island proper.

About 10 percent of the over six hundred individual modules contained walls with defensive capabilities and gun emplacements. Roughly 20 percent contained hangars for Nalakuvera and support facilities thereof. The remaining 70 percent was simply a city—a ruined city that had lost its inhabitants. It strongly resembled the interior of a giant spaceship from an old-fashioned movie.

Asagi Aiba was leisurely observing the ruined city's skyline from her cabin on the *Oceanus Grave II*.

"Li'l miss, you have a message."

Via her beloved smartphone, Mogwai spoke with his usual sardonic tone.

"From the HGTO? What do they want *now*? Begging for their lives or something?"

Asagi listlessly rose to her feet, posing the question to her partner Ai. It was just before noon. By rights, it was right around when the HGTO Military ought to have been starting a full-scale attack.

However, for some reason, Mogwai seemed to deliberately bring a grave look over his face.

“Nahhh. The message sender calls himself the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Whaaat?”

Asagi gazed at the badly sewn teddy bear on the screen with visible bewilderment.

“Fourth Primogenitor...you mean Kojou? Why is he using this line?”

“So what’s my man Kojou saying?” asked Motoki Yaze, who’d just had a leftover pizza slice in hand and licked his greasy fingers. He’d come to negotiate with Asagi, acting as the representative for the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

Asagi’s brow furled as her eyes fell to the smartphone’s screen.

“...It says ‘Itogami Island and the artificial isle present in the sea around it have been recognized by the Holy Ground Treaty Organization as the territory of the Fourth Primogenitor. Hereafter, all those engaged in illegal occupation thereof are to lay down their arms, surrender, and immediately forfeit all territorial rights...’ Huuuh?!”

“‘If these demands are not met, they shall be eliminated by force,’ huh... This is a declaration of war. In other words, a final ultimatum.”

Mogwai cackled.

For her part, Asagi’s face was tinged bright red with anger.

“Wh...wh...what is that *idiot* thinking?! What the hell does he think we started all of this for...?!”

“Mmm... This changes the course of events, though,” Yaze said calmly, trying to soothe the indignant Asagi.

As Yaze munched on more pizza, Asagi shot him a questioning glare.

“What do you mean?”

“If Kojou defeats you folks—or Dimitrie Vattler, rather, at the very least it avoids a war. Itogami Island won’t be destroyed, and the HGTO non-signatory nations won’t butt in, either. I don’t think these are bad terms, but—”

“Then all of this will be meaningless!”

Asagi violently slammed the table. She exhaled raggedly, like a mountain lion with her fur on end. Yaze’s eyes bulged at the sight of his childhood friend emotional like never before.

Ignoring him, Asagi turned back to her smartphone.

“Mogwai, this information, has Mr. Vattler—?”

“Of course I have heard.”

Asagi, hearing that invigorated voice from the hallway, muttered “Oh, crap” as she clutched her head. The door to the cabin opened wide, and a young, blond aristocrat emerged with a smile full of satisfaction.

“The order of events is slightly off schedule, but if anything, this more convenient. After all, I thought it more difficult to make Kojou minded to fight. I shall give an attack from his side a warm welcome.”

Vattler, acting like he couldn’t be more pleased, spoke with vigor in his voice.

Though he had engaged in a variety of schemes to stir up a large war, Vattler’s motivation for his actions was very simple. He craved a battle with a powerful foe; that was all.

That said, as events would have it, Vattler was also a person on the side of protecting Itogami Island. The odds of Kojou, standing in an identical position, directly confronting him were low. Through some unexpected development, it was Kojou launching an attack. Small wonder Vattler was pleased.

“If you defeat Kojou, the chances of stopping the war go *poof*, though.”

“I suppose they do...”

When Yaze spread both arms and tossed out that line, Vattler nodded, amused.

Asagi glared at the young blond aristocrat. “I have no intention of helping you fight Kojou.”

“Of course, that’s not a problem. I have long awaited an enjoyable bloodbath with the Fourth Primogenitor. Using something crude such as The Cleansing would spoil all the fun.”

“Oh, really now?”

Speaking her words in a frigid tone, Asagi picked up her favorite laptop.

Yaze looked up at Asagi with a visible twinge of unease. “...A-Asagi?”

“I’m heading out. I’m going to convince Kojou to join our side. Got it?”

“Do as you please. Kojou and I fighting the three Primogenitors shoulder to shoulder is a most attractive proposal. I eagerly await the results of your overture.”

Vattler was as theatrical as ever. Asagi sourly let out her breath before leaving the cabin in silence.

“Now then, what do you intend to do, Mr. New President Yaze?” Vattler asked with a grin.

“You can ask me that all you like, but I’m just an observer.” Yaze shrugged.

Yume and Lydianne were on standby outside the ship, on guard against the multinational fleet’s attack. Yuri and Shio had been freed with Glenda, whose role had already come to an end. Yaze and Vattler were the only two people left in the cabin. It was meaningless to hide his status any longer.

“I wonder. Is it not you who joined hands with the Chaos Bride, working with her behind the scenes?”

Vattler’s blue eyes cruelly stared at Yaze, who smiled casually and shook his head.

“You’re overestimating me. Like a proper observer, I’m gonna shut up and watch to the bitter end.”

When he opened his eyes, Kojou was in the study once more.

The metal manacles were off his wrists; the magical symbols had lost their glow. The mist surrounding him lifted. Kojou waited for his dizziness to settle down before standing up from the uncomfortable chair resembling some kind of torture device.

Aradahl was folding both arms in silence. In contrast, for some reason, La Folia was in a very good mood, smiling at Kojou.

“—You negotiated splendidly, Kojou. This is why I have marked you as my future spouse.”

“Don’t go marking without asking. Oh, um, the advice you gave me did help, though...”

Apparently, the scene Kojou saw had been conveyed to the princess and the others while they’d been surrounded in mist. Kojou himself had felt the presence of La Folia and company near to him. Had he not, Kojou probably could have never moved forward with negotiations so calmly under those circumstances. The councillors he’d met at the Garden of Whispers were simply that overwhelming.

It wasn’t just the three primogenitors; the other nine had considerable power of their own. Thinking back upon it, successfully negotiating with them as an equal seemed nigh miraculous.

“All that remains is to seize control of the Legacy of Cain from the Duke of Ardeal. Tee-hee... Once Kojou becomes king of a nation in name and fact, my father can hardly object...”

“You still haven’t forgotten that talk...?!”

Kojou’s face twitched.

He’d completely forgotten about it, but the first time Kojou had met La Folia, she’d pursued him for marriage. Her stated reason, and really, not a very good one, was that her doting father was likely to resist letting go of her at all. Of course, given that this was La Folia, chances were good that she was up to her usual pranks, but she was a frightening girl when she was serious.

Aradahl, ignorant of those circumstances, turned a questioning look Kojou's way.

Heedless of Kojou and Aradahl being thrown askew, La Folia spoke behind her without turning her head.

"Justina, send a message to the *Böðvildr*. From this moment forward, my Aldegian Knights of the Second Coming shall assault the *Oceanus Grave II* in support of Kojou Akatsuki, Lord of an allied nation. Order all captains to prepare the knights and ready for combat with all available speed."

"As you command."

Kataya Justina, invisible due to magical camouflage, suddenly appeared as she replied.

Nervously listening to this exchange was Sayaka, waiting just outside the study.

"P-Princess...? Don't tell me you intend to personally participate in combat...?!"

"Such is my duty. I am a crown princess of Aldegia, blessed by the Spirits. I shall carry my royal name onto the battlefield."

After speaking this in a tone filled with majesty, La Folia spoke to herself, seemingly as an afterthought.

"—Besides, it is far too entertaining to pass up, is it not?"

"That's the real reason, isn't it...?!" Sayaka shouted in a shrill voice. "You mustn't! Princess, as Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, I have been ordered by the government of Japan to escort you. I absolutely cannot accept such dangerous action!"

"But you see, Sayaka. The government of Japan has relinquished its territorial rights over Itogami Island. In other words, I am not presently in Japan, so you do not have any right to give me orders, do you?"

"W...well..."

La Folia's airtight logic left Sayaka lacking any words for a rebuttal. The silver-haired princess posed another question to hammer the idea in further.

“Besides that,” La Folia said, shifting her attention, “Yukina, as Kojou’s watcher, you intend to accompany him in battle against the Duke of Ardeal?”

“Yes,” said the latter, as if the answer was obvious. Sayaka’s voice caught in her throat. To her, La Folia flashed a seductive smile.

“In other words, by coming with me and continuing your escort mission on the battlefield, it is possible for you to give Yukina aid. Or will you refuse to accept my going into battle even still?”

“B...by any chance, did you designate me to be your escort because you expected this to happen from the...?”

“Tee-hee. You will protect me and keep me safe, won’t you, Sayaka?”

“Haaah...”

Being on the receiving end of La Folia’s innocent smile, Sayaka sighed at length and nodded. She was considered a blackhearted, scheming princess for her negotiation skills in the first place; there was no way Sayaka could dissuade her. La Folia won by a mile, just as Kojou had expected.

Seeing that Sayaka was silent, the princess next called out to the female knight behind her.

“Justina, give it to Yukina.”

“Yes. Lady Sword Shaman, please take this.”

Upon receiving her liege’s command, she reverentially tendered a case in front of Yukina. It was a military carry case about the size of a schoolbag.

“Um...what is this?” The sudden gift from the female knight brought a perplexed look over Yukina.

“If I may be so bold, it is something I provisioned on my own, arbitrary judgment. I originally prepared it for Her Highness the Royal Sister, but I thought it would be fairly inconvenient for her—please!”

“Th...thank you very much. I shall take it..... I shall take it, so please stop kneeling!”

Overwhelmed by the female knight’s prostrate earnestness, Yukina took the

case. Justina bowed deeply to her.

“Well then, Kojou—I am pleased to go fight alongside you once more.” Acting very much as the elegant princess she was, La Folia grasped the hem of her short skirt and beamed at him. “Let us meet again on the battlefield.”

The princess proceeded to turn on her heels, heading out of the room with her knight in tow. Sayaka seemed at the end of her wits as she followed the pair. The three were headed to the airport. There awaited the armored airship *Böðvildr*, pride of the kingdom of Aldegia.

“—Kojou Akatsuki. You two, come here.”

Kojou and Yukina were left behind and feeling out of place when Aradahl called out to them from back in the reception room. The black-haired vampire was staring at a military tablet device placed atop the table within.

Displayed on its large screen was a map of an unfamiliar island spiraling out like a galaxy.

“What is this?”

“The entirety of the Legacy of Cain that envelops Itogami Island. The information comes from the Gigafloat Management Corporation. I had heard orbital satellites cannot be used due to the Priestess of Cain’s hacking, but it seems they also have someone skilled on their side.”

“Hmmm...”

Hearing Aradahl’s words of praise, Kojou found them a little surprising. Ever since Asagi had hijacked their press conference broadcast midway, not much had been heard from the Corporation, but they seemed to be getting the job done.

Reflecting upon it calmly, given Itogami Island’s present situation, the fact that there wasn’t a large-scale panic arising was pretty incredible. Even considering that Itogami Island’s residents were accustomed to disasters, there was no doubt the Corporation was engaged in various countermeasures to cope.

“Is this the *Oceanus Grave II*’s current position?” Yukina inquired as she

noticed a red dot displayed on the map. Dimitrie Vattler's cruise ship was moving clockwise in a gap located in the artificial isle.

It was about forty kilometers removed from Kojou and Yukina's location on Itogami Island proper. Numerous gun emplacements and a horde of Nalakuvera protected the *Oceanus Grave II*. As befitting the headquarters of the Anti-HGTO Military, its defenses were stiff. But compared to evading Leviathan from the outside, the route from the inside was shorter and no doubt easier.

"As we will leave support to the Aldegian armored airship, we will take our seaplane—the *Strix*—and charge in. We're faster, after all."

"...You're helping with this, too?"

Kojou looked at Aradahl in surprise. In terms of common sense, he had no reason to cooperate with Kojou. To Aradahl, Vattler was comrade and kin, whereas Kojou was his opponent in a duel. Either way, it was crystal clear which one of them held a standpoint close to an enemy.

However, Aradahl turned to Kojou with a sober, serious expression.

"Vattler's current actions are treason against the Warlord's Empire. Is it not natural for the people of his Dominion to shoulder the burden of bringing him to justice?"

"...Well, whatever your reasons, to be honest, it's a big help having you lend a hand."

Kojou spoke his honest thoughts. Thanks to the emergence of an unexpected savior, a strategy for going after Vattler had been set. All that remained was to actually board the Legacy of Cain and drive Vattler out.

Aradahl rang a bell to call for the butler. The lodging was so high-class that the rooms were served by a full-time butler and a staff of maids.

After delivering rapid-fire instructions to them, Aradahl spoke to Kojou and Yukina in a very direct tone.

"A room is being prepared for you. As soon as the flying boat is ready to launch, we will move to the airport by teleportation. You should finish your replenishment by then—"

“...Replenishment?”

Kojou and Yukina looked at each other’s perplexed faces.

5

“Perhaps he meant a meal is to be provided?”

What’s this replenishment business? thought Kojou, tilting his head when Yukina made that little whisper into his ear.

“Ah, gotcha,” went Kojou, nodding as he accepted her view. The maxim that one cannot fight on an empty stomach was a truth recognized in every nation on Earth. It wouldn’t be strange if Aradahl had been considerate enough to order a meal for them.

“If so, I’m pretty grateful. Last thing I ate was ramen for lunch with Iblisveil at noon yesterday.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Yukina, seeming happy.

And in a hotel like this, the meals have to be something else, thought Kojou, secretly raising his hopes. However, when he entered the room, Kojou understood that those hopes had been so easily betrayed.

“This way,” said the maid in an old-fashioned apron dress, indicating a most extravagant room to the pair. It had a vast, king-sized bed and countless pillows. The interior lighting gave the room a phantasmal feel, and the scent of large aromatic candles wafted in the air. There was a vast shower room with a glass wall over it. This was no atmosphere for eating. Any way he looked at it, this was a bedroom for a couple on a honeymoon.

“A...Aradahl...!”

Kojou thrust his hands onto the bed, groaning in a low voice.

“However serious he might seem, he is a vampire nonetheless, I see...”

For her part, Yukina’s shoulders sank in visible disappointment. Faced with a bedroom unsuited to meals, it sunk in that *replenishment* held a very different meaning to vampires.

After all, it was not hunger that triggered vampiric impulses, but lust. Aradahl had meant *Go and drink Yukina's blood*.

That was what he'd provided the room for. The show of consideration was just like the sober, serious Aradahl, but the direction it took was completely awry.

"Come to think of it, what did Justina give you anyway?"

Kojou asked as he sat a corner of the bed. He realized that the silence within the room was making the atmosphere really strange.

"I wonder? She said it was really for Kano, but..."

Upon saying this, Yukina opened the case Justina had handed her. Within the case, which was around ten centimeters thick, was a Saikai Academy schoolgirl uniform and a fresh pair of underwear, all neatly folded.

The bra-and-shorts pair mixed white lace and pastel stripes. They came off as pure, and at the same time, a very classy kind of cute.

"This is...Kanase's..."

"Goodness! Just what are you thinking?!"

Yukina shot Kojou a reproachful glare as she violently slammed the case lid shut. *What's she blaming me for?* he thought, feeling like he'd been wronged somehow.

"What is La Folia giving you a uniform for?"

"I believe she is being considerate. My uniform is as it was when I fell into the sea, after all...as are my, um, underwear..."

"Ah...come to think of it, you do smell like the sea a bit. Your skin's a little sticky, too..."

"I s-smell like the sea...and I'm sticky..."

Yukina hung her head as if she'd been smacked, a crestfallen look coming over her.

"Well, don't worry about it, I went into the sea same as you did. Besides, it's not like the scent bothers me or anything."

“Please stop sniffing me already!”

Yukina sent a pillow flying straight at his face. He wasn't even particularly close to Yukina. *This is totally unfair*, thought Kojou, his lips twisting. Either way, given the circumstances, the shower room Aradahl had provided would not go to waste.

“Er, you're not gonna change clothes?”

“I will, but...it is somewhat difficult to change clothes after senpai has already seen my underwear, isn't it...?”

Yukina shot him a resentful glare, carry case still in hand. *Oh, so that's what this is about*. Kojou was half beside himself.

“It's fine, Himeragi. I mean, the design suits you and all.”

“Please, stop imagining me in them!”

Yukina's cheeks reddened as she slammed him with a pillow once more. Unable to resist the impact, Kojou tumbled onto the bed. Staying there, he sighed as he stopped moving.

“Senpai?”

“Ah, I'm all right. Just a bit of an empty stomach.”

Kojou spoke in a frail voice. Due to expecting too much out of Aradahl, his sense of hunger was at a level that was no joke. Come to think of it, he'd gone close to an entire day with barely anything to eat.

Even if he was an unaging, undying vampire, of course physical activity caused hunger. If anything, his having used excessive amounts of strength in the duel with Aradahl made him far more depleted than a normal human would be by then.

“I do have emergency rations... Would you like some?”

Yukina gingerly posed the question, as if unable to watch Kojou immobile due to hunger. Kojou opened his eyes wide, sitting up with considerable force. The echo of the words “emergency rations” felt like a glimmer of hope.

“Can they be eaten, like, right now?”

“Well, yes...”

For some reason, a hesitant expression came over Yukina as she stretched a hand to her usual guitar case. From a compartment meant for music sheets and shielded cables, she took out a paper box wrapped with a ribbon.

When she opened the box’s lid, a scent of baked butter and chocolate spread forth.

There were cookies inside the box. The box’s interior was stuffed chock-full of chocolate cookies shaped like Kojou’s Beast Vassals.

“Himeragi, these are...”

“Emergency rations.” Yukina obstinately made the assertion in a flat voice. “Th-there was a little time at Ms. Minamiya’s residence while you were asleep, senpai, so...I told Miss Astarte that I wanted to make something, and it ended up like this... It has absolutely nothing to do with Valentine’s Day whatsoever...”

“Ah...well, anything’s good. Thanks a bunch.”

Kojou put his hands together and offered a quick “Thanks for the meal” before picking up one of Yukina’s cookies. The sugar content seemed to swirl and sink deeply into Kojou’s bloodstream. He was so moved that his entire body shook.

For some reason, Kojou’s reaction made Yukina stop breathing, staring at him with a serious look.

“H...how does it taste?”

“It’s delicious.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m so glad.”

Yukina patted her chest in a show of relief. Then she abruptly broke into a sunny smile.

“Then, senpai. I am sorry, but could you leave the room for a little while? I wish to shower before changing into new clothes.”

“Ah, okay. I suppose you would.”

Shifting his eyes toward the glass-covered shower room, Kojou gave a strained smile as he nodded. If Yukina showered in a place like that with him around, awkward wouldn't even remotely do it justice. For mutual peace of mind, it was clearly best for Kojou to leave the room for a little while.

“Is it all right if I take the cookies with me?”

“Yes. I prepared them for your sake, after all. Please have as many as you like. And I will enjoy getting a little payback.”

“Payback, er, for the emergency rations...?”

“Tee-hee... I am joking.”

“Um, joking, about which part...? Himeragi?”

Were these really emergency rations, or was this actually a Valentine's Day present? Kojou was fiercely consternated about just how to take Yukina's words.

However, Yukina said nothing more in reply, forcefully driving Kojou out of the room.

6

About an hour passed after that until preparations to launch the flying boat were complete.

The kingdom of Aldegia's *Böðvildr* had already gone ahead to begin approaching the Legacy of Cain. It was only a matter of time until the fighting began in earnest.

The flying boat Kojou and Yukina were aboard departed from the airport on Itogami Island proper. Flying at low altitude, not even sixty meters off the ground, it headed toward the *Oceanus Grave II*. At that rate, it would not even be ten minutes until they came into contact with Vattler and company... provided they encountered no obstacles.

“Have you recovered your energy, Kojou Akatsuki?”

As Kojou sat in the flying boat's cabin, Aradahl posed the question. The *Strix* was a large craft with a wingspan of over forty meters. The interior was more spacious than one would expect from an aircraft.

"Well, I filled my stomach, at least."

Speaking this without any deep thought, Kojou realized his own verbal slip. Aradahl surely thought that Kojou had been drinking Yukina's blood back in that room.

"W-wait, wrong idea. Aradahl, you're misunderstanding. My stomach's full because of the cooki—"

"The Sword Shaman is your Blood Concubine. There is nothing to be ashamed of."

"If you put it like that, it sounds even more like something we should be ashamed of!"

Kojou desperately clung to any handhold in the face of Aradahl's indifferent statement. During that time, Yukina's face was blue as she checked her seatbelt over and over. She wasn't good with airplanes.

Suddenly, that same Yukina shifted her gaze outside the cabin window.

"Senpai, there, Leviathan!"

"Wha...?!"

Kojou and Aradahl simultaneously rose to their feet. The *Strix* had only barely finished takeoff. It wasn't more than ten kilometers from the airport. Asagi and company had placed Leviathan so close that it was right on the tip of Itogami Island's nose.

A gargantuan sea serpent was floating in the cramped confines of a gap in the spiraling gigafloats. A volley of several hundred black objects resembling seagulls launched from its back.

Spurting white smoke, these turned about and bore down on the *Strix* all at once. Kojou paled when he recognized their true nature.

"Living missiles, huh—!"

“Tch... Dance, Ghoul—!”

Aradahl summoned his own Beast Vassal to the flying boat’s fore—a horde of hundreds of darkness-colored short swords. These scattered all at once, intercepting Leviathan’s living missiles in midflight. It was a robust technique made possible only through Aradahl’s vast demonic energy and the special characteristics of his Intelligent Weapon Beast Vassal.

“Damn that Yume; no questions asked, huh!”

“One should not complain about that after issuing a declaration of war.”

Aradahl calmly played the straight man to Kojou’s unintentionally voiced complaint. “I suppose you’re right,” said Kojou, sighing deeply. The war had already begun.

“—C’mon over, Dabih Crystallus!”

Kojou summoned a beautiful piscine dragon with silver crystal wings. Its horns, curved like that of a ram’s, released a glow, and this light seemed to captivate Leviathan as its motions froze in place.

“I see... A Beast Vassal of Charm,” Aradahl murmured in apparent praise.

As heir to Lilith, the Witch of the Night, Yume was controlling Leviathan using her succubus mind-control powers. However, it was not only succubi that possessed the Ability of mind control. The tenth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, Dabih Crystallus, possessed the very same mind-control capability.

With that Beast Vassal’s power, Kojou overrode Yume’s mental control and sent Leviathan back to the bottom of the sea—the deep, distant sea, beyond where Yume’s control could reach. And then—

“Himeragi, can you pick out Yume’s location?”

Sensing Yume’s mental waves, Yukina pointed out the flying boat’s course and shouted, “Directly ahead, on a plateau in front of the *Oceanus Gra*—”

But before she could even finish, they heard the captain shouting in anger from the cockpit.

“*Bogey straight ahead!*”

“Nn—?”

When AradahI entered the cockpit, his eyes grew graver still. A huge monster resembling a beetle was flying up from the ground to intercept the *Strix*. Spurting fire from nozzles within its armor, it flew with frightening speed.

“Nalakuvera! Wait, they can fly?!”

“Pests,” muttered AradahI as he commanded his Beast Vassal to attack. Dark blades bore down on a Nalakuvera, ripping apart the thick armor covering its large frame until not even a trace remained.

With its duty finished, AradahI called the Beast Vassal back, firing it out against a second Nalakuvera. But—

“AradahI, don’t!”

“What?!”

Kojou could not stop him in time before short swords collided with the Nalakuvera.

It was AradahI’s Beast Vassal swords that bounced off. The Nalakuvera used chakram-style missiles, intercepting the dark short swords and altering their course.

“They learned to counter my attack...?”

AradahI let out a low groan. The Nakakuvera, known as the Weapons of the Gods, were feared because of their knowledge of computer networks, self-repair, self-improvement, and self-evolution capabilities. Where a horde of Nalakuvera was concerned, the same attack never worked twice.

Having slipped past AradahI’s attack, the Nalakuvera fired a large-caliber laser. The scarlet beam sliced and rent the wing of the now lightly defended *Strix*. One of its four engines exploded, causing the fuselage of the flying boat to heavily tilt.

The Nalakuvera circled around the *Strix*, unleashing its large-caliber laser anew. Flying toward it was a twin-headed dragon covered in quicksilver scales.

“Al-Meissa Mercury!!”

Kojou's summoned Beast Vassal opened its enormous maws wide, swallowing up the Nalakuvera along with the space surrounding it. Because the damage was not to the unit itself, the Nalakuvera's learning network did not activate, nor was there any longer a unit to repair.

"Sorry there. I'm used to taking on guys like you—"

Kojou let out a murmur, feeling a bit guilty as he watched the horde of Nalakuvera being eaten one after another. The third Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor consumed space itself, with bad effects on the surrounding area. It was one he avoided summoning if he could help it.

However, the menace of the Nalakuvera might have receded, but that didn't repair the flying boat's damage. Having lost half of its wings, the *Strix* approached the ground at a speed of a "fall" rather than a "descent." Since it was flying at low altitude to begin with, there was virtually zero altitude to give before they crashed.

"Your Excellency, we cannot maintain altitude! We are crash-landing!"

"All hands, brace for impact—!"

The captain and Aradahl respectively shouted. The crew of the *Strix* desperately clung to anything they could within the unstable vessel. Kojou drew close to Yukina, immobile from fear, and embraced her.

"Senpai! Ground Nalakuveras!"

Her entire body was still rigid in fear as Yukina made that sharp warning.

As the *Strix* continued to fall, ground-model Nalakuveras were lying in wait. The barrels of their large-caliber laser cannons glowed red from charged-up energy. They were aimed at the *Strix* with the intent of attacking the instant it hit the ground.

"Damn that Asagi, she's seriously trying to kill us, ain't she...?!"

The merciless attack coming in waves made something snap inside Kojou's head. If the opponent was fair game, then Kojou had no duty to hold back, either.

"Shit... C'mon over, Natra Cinereus! Sadalmelik Albus—!"

Kojou summoned new Beast Vassals. Emerging to envelop the flying boat was an enormous shelled beast covered in dense, silver-colored mist. Transforming the crash-landing *Strix*, passengers and all, into such dense, silver mist, the impact of the crash was nullified.

Simultaneously, an Undine emerged from the waterway, transforming her own body into a torrential deluge that swept the horde of Nalakuvera away.

Without exception, the ones that sank into the water began to crumble away. The armor, which supposedly had self-repair capabilities, fell apart as if it were sand. It wasn't that they couldn't repair—quite the opposite. The Undine governing the power of restoration was restoring the Nalakuvera beyond the limits of any self-repair functionality, to a time when they were nothing more than raw materials yet to be assembled—

“Ow... You okay there, Himeragi?”

On his back after being hurled to the ground, Kojou posed the question to Yukina, still in his arms against his chest. Though they'd somehow managed to crash-land, the fuselage of the *Strix* was all a jumble. Kojou's Beast Vassal could transform any kind of matter into mist, but that didn't mean it would return to its original form. Thanks to the force of the impact making the mist scatter spectacularly, the difficulty of restoration increased further still.

“Yes, somehow. It would seem the entire crew is also safe.”

Yukina helped the hurting and tired Kojou rise to his feet. Fortunately, the crew members of the *Strix* were all basically unscathed. Of course, he didn't even need to check whether Aradahl was all right.

“...So this is the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. I thank you for having saved my subordinates,” the vampire said quietly.

“It's no big deal,” Kojou said with a shrug. As he did so, Aradahl tossed something down right before his eyes. It was a military-spec, shock-resistant tablet device—the same one that had displayed the map earlier.

“I would say it is ten kilometers between here and Vattler's ship. Go on ahead, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“What are you gonna do, Aradahl?”

The black-haired vampire made no reply, proceeding to lift his face with a deeply serious expression. At the end of Aradahl's gaze stood a figure in a white coat, standing on an uninhabited building.

He had a slender, small frame. He had soft, androgynous, handsome features. However, his eyes glowed crimson, and sharp fangs were poking out of his lips. He was Kira Lebedev, vampire of the Warlord's Empire—

"I shall engage him—"

Aradahl murmured as demonic energy mist enveloped his entire body.

As Kojou and Yukina stood rooted to the spot in astonishment, Kira smiled beautifully toward them.

7

Sayaka swiftly began to regret having accepted that La Folia go to the battlefield, for the attacks by the HGTO non-signatory alliance Military was far more severe than she had anticipated.

"The *Strix* has been shot down. Sir Fourth Primogenitor and Lady Sword Shaman are both intact. The Duke of Severin has engaged Count Voltislava in combat."

"Four Floaty cruise missiles remaining. All port turrets, two starboard turrets are presently on cooldown."

"One hundred and forty seconds before spiritual reactor reaches operational limit—"

On the bridge of the armored airship *Böðvildr*, the operators' dry voices sailed to and fro. Their demeanor was composed, but the information they reported all reflected a worsening state of battle.

Within range of its guns, the Legacy of Cain had overwhelming combat capacity enabling it to challenge the HGTO Military in a head-on battle. However cutting edge it might be, a single armored airship could do nothing against such an opponent.

“Now then, what shall we do, Princess? Those bug bastards seem to have taken quite a liking to this ship. I was always awful at collecting insects.”

The captain, a middle-aged man with a dignified, weathered face making him look like some kind of pirate, questioned the princess with a jesting tone in his voice.

In the airspace above the steel-colored artificial isle, the *Böðvildr* was engaged in combat with a unit of nine flying Nalakuvera. What had begun as an evenly matched fight turned against them when the *Böðvildr*'s weapons came to have virtually no effect on the Nalakuvera. The ancient weapons' evolutionary self-repair capability had already granted them resistance to the *Böðvildr*'s attacks. If they continued the one-sided battle, the sustained attacks would inevitably destroy their defenses at some point.

“Princess...?”

Finding it strange that the princess had not replied, the captain looked around the bridge. However, La Folia was nowhere to be seen within the cramped confines of the bridge. All that remained was an empty seat. The instant he'd taken his eyes off her and Sayaka, the princess had slipped out of the bridge on her own.

“Teleportation chamber activated! Jump coordinates, current estimated location of Lilith!”

One of the operators raised a suddenly tense voice.

“Dammit all...”

Covering his face in apparent resignation, the captain shook his head. It was probably forty to fifty kilometers from the *Böðvildr*'s current location to where Lilith was judged to be hiding.

Moving by teleport over such a long distance was nigh impossible. The magical calculations required for teleportation increased astronomically depending upon the distance of the movement required. The only spellcaster who could pull off such a reckless act solo was probably the witch specializing in spatial-control magic—Natsuki Minamiya.

However, if La Folia, blessed by the Spirits, employed the warship-class

spiritual reactor with which the *Böðvildr* was equipped, even the impossible became possible. One could overcome insufficiently precise math with enough magical energy to force space to remain stable. Of course, such a trip was one-way only. Furthermore, it was impossible to send her escorting knights after her, but La Folia was not one to heed such concerns.

“Princess!”

Racing out of the bridge, Sayaka rushed into the teleportation chamber in the aft of the ship. The chamber, with a spatial control engraved into its walls, was only wide enough to accommodate two people at the utmost. This was why it could not be used to send a unit of knights.

Within the chamber, the silver-haired princess toyed with the control panel, as if all had gone as she had foreseen.

“Princess La Folia! Don’t tell me you intend to go on the ground? Under these conditions?!”

“Either way, at this rate, we cannot escape. We must smash the source controlling the Nalakuvera.”

Even the sight of Sayaka coming after her did not change La Folia’s expression. If anything, it felt like she’d been waiting for Sayaka to do just that.

“After we disembark, the *Böðvildr* is to stand by at high altitude. You may devote the spiritual reactor’s output into deploying the Holy Protection Barrier.”

“—Understood. But please do nothing rash, Princess. Your father’s going to kill me if anything happens to you.”

Sayaka heard the captain’s thick voice through the interior communication system.

“—Er, Captain!”

“I shall take thy words to heart.”

Stop her already, went Sayaka’s objection, but before it could reach the bridge, La Folia activated the teleporter.

Sayaka and La Folia were assaulted by an incredible wavering in space that

never happened with any normal teleport. A blue flash filled their vision. It was backlash from the long-range teleport.

When they landed, there was a crater gouging the ground surrounding Sayaka and La Folia with a radius of four to five meters. Every standing structure within dozens of meters had been mowed down. Had it been any normal urban area, it would have been an unmitigated disaster. However, Sayaka and La Folia were unharmed thanks to a powerful magical bulwark, generated by the princess and the *Böðvildr*'s own spiritual reactor.

“Sayaka—”

Heedless of the end of such a reckless trek, La Folia called out to Sayaka in a composed voice. In her right hand, the princess gripped a spell gun ornamented with gold.

“Yes.”

Sayaka nodded slightly, drawing her sword from the instrument case on her back. This was Lustrous Scale, a prototype area-suppression weapon of the Lion King Agency. Sayaka pointed its tip toward a bridge visible in front of them.

“...Well, well. Her Highness, Princess of Aldegia, is it?”

The elevated bridge strongly resembled the monorail tracks running through Itogami City. Bathed in the rays of the afternoon sun, a beautiful blond girl stood atop it. She'd detected precursors of the teleport and had taken position to await Sayaka and La Folia.

She was wearing a crimson bunny suit. The suit's exterior had a metal exoskeleton on it that resembled bondage. Carrying a six-barreled anti-demon machine gun in each hand with ease, she pointed those gun barrels straight at La Folia.

The girl in the augmented bunny suit bowed, her gestures no less elegant than La Folia's own.

“I am honored to set eyes upon you after so long. Taking the world for granted, walking onto a battlefield on your own without your knights as escorts... You really haven't changed a bit. However, this is not the dance floor at a ball. I recommend that you run back before you get hurt and cry.”

The girl in the augmented bunny suit bowed. Her gestures were no less elegant than La Folia's own.

"Er...um..."

Sayaka could not conceal her bewilderment at the emergence of a thoroughly out-of-place enemy. However, judging from her voice, she seemed to be an acquaintance of La Folia's.

As if in search of a lifeline, Sayaka shifted her eyes to the side of La Folia's face.

"...Who is she?"

"Who knows?"

Speaking those words, La Folia made an adorable tilt of her wrist. *You don't know, either*, thought Sayaka, shifting from somewhat to thoroughly lost.

The blond beauty in the powered bunny suit widened her eyes in abject shock.

"It's Vika! VIKA! Victoria of the Duchy of Assente! We met at the ball in Chromis a year back!"

"Ah...! Princess Victoria of Assente—so the rumors were true, you really did join the Duke of Ardeal's harem as a hostage for a nonaggression treaty with the Warlord's Empire."

Clap. La Folia's hands lightly struck together as she innocently narrowed her eyes. And as if making a show of pity for the Oceanus Girls' blond bombshell, she gave an exaggerated sigh.

"I had heard that due to the Duke of Ardeal having no interest in human women, the girls in full bloom with him remain virgins, forced to play soldier night after night—but to think you would end up dressed like *that*."

"Sh-shut up! What's wrong with being a virgin?! And I'm still nineteen, you know?! Would you stop talking as if I'm too old for marriage?!" Her voice was shrill, softening just a little to add, "There's only a two-year gap between us anyway."

La Folia said nothing, letting out a "tee-hee" with a little grin, making the

blond beauty scream in anger all the more.

It was then that Sayaka, too, realized that La Folia was angering her opponent on purpose. Reunited with an acquaintance on the battlefield only to make her fly into a rage in the span of a second, she seemed to relish living up to her reputation as a blackhearted scheming princess.

“Why are you going out of your way to provoke the opponent?!”

“Provoke...? I am merely stating the truth.”

When Sayaka, visibly exasperated, posed that question, La Folia blinked, as if finding it a completely unexpected thing to hear.

A *gaaaah* sound rose from the blond beauty in the augmented bunny suit as she turned off the anti-demon machine gun’s safety.

“And I thought I’d go out of my way to capture you unharmed...! Martha! Lana! Mithrina, Valeria!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

With resigned voices and strained smiles, girls dressed in augmented bunny suits came out of windows and rooftops of the surrounding buildings one after another. They wore blue and yellow, white and black—with the initial red one included, they numbered five in total. They had completely surrounded Sayaka and company. La Folia had provoked the first of them to drag the other girls out of their hiding places—probably.

“P-Princess...”

What are you trying to do? Sayaka implored to the side of La Folia’s face. As she did so, La Folia looked back at Sayaka with an odd degree of earnestness.

“Sayaka.”

“Y-yes.”

“What do you really think of Kojou?”

“I’m sorry...?”

“I am asking if you like or dislike Kojou. I am asking if you desire to be in a relationship with him.”

“Wh-what are you talking about—and at a time like this?! Look at the situation!!” Sayaka’s voice went shrill as she shouted back in anger.

The five girls in augmented bunny suits had finished preparing various pieces of heavy weaponry to fire. In contrast, there was not a single piece of surrounding cover for Sayaka or La Folia to hide behind. No matter how you sliced it, it was not a situation for leisurely discussion of one’s love life.

However, La Folia continued in a sober tone of voice. “I am asking *because* it is a time like this. See here, Sayaka. We are fighting this battle so that Kojou may become the king of his Dominion. He will be sovereign, meaning that his rule will be law. The law that dictates that a man may only take one wife shall no longer be any obstacle. And like every king, Kojou requires a harem.”

“No, he does not!!”

“He does. After all, he is a vampire primogenitor.”

La Folia’s reply made Sayaka audibly gasp.

A primogenitor’s wife. That’s what it meant to be such a vampire’s Blood Concubine—an unaging, undying pseudo-vampire. If both were male, one would likely call him a Blood Vassal instead. Such women swore eternal fealty to their primogenitor, fighting by his side as an army of immortals. That was what La Folia truly meant by *harem*.

“A primogenitor’s Blood Concubine is more than a simple object of his love and affection. They are the soldiers that protect the Dominion. The duty to protect the Dominion’s territory and populace falls not solely on the primogenitor alone but to the elite Blood Vassals he has assembled. Do you have the resolve to be one among them—?”

“It—it’s not like I actually thought about being K-Kojou Akatsuki’s...Vassal...”

“Is that so...? Well, that is fine as well. If you fall in love with someone else, grow old with him, and die, like a normal person, that is one form of happiness.”

“Ah, er... Me falling for someone other than Kojou Akatsuki is pretty hopeless, actually...”

La Folia's oddly world-wise words brought a nervous refutation from Sayaka. Even at that late juncture, Sayaka had been unable to leave her fundamental distrust of men behind. Kojou was the single exception.

"Besides, if it means being together with Yukina... Anything's good. Hell, harem, whatever."

"Well, let us leave it at that for the time being..."

La Folia's smile vanished as she looked up at the girls in augmented bunny suits. Due to the princess's questions, they'd completely lost all opportunity to flee. At that point, the girls' envelopment could not be breached.

"Are you finished with your trivial chit-chat, La Folia Rihavein?"

The blond beauty in the red suit flashed a smile of pure ferocity as she asked. The next moment, her machine guns roared and belched fire. Simultaneously, the other four began their attacks in a single volley.

"Ritual stun rounds, fire—!"

"Launch electromagnetic net!"

"Firing."

"FIRE—!"

"Urk...!"

Sayaka's face contorted as merciless attacks poured down from four directions. The weapons the Oceanus Girls employed were all using rounds for taking captives, but under such a barrage, they would not emerge from the nonlethal attacks unscathed.

However, La Folia smiled as she gazed back at the incoming rounds.

"Sayaka. *Not the sword—the bow.*"

"Ah...?"

Perplexed, Sayaka looked at the long sword in her grip. Lustrous Scale, prototype area-suppression weapon of the Lion King Agency, was granted two modes—sword and bow. However you sliced it, in that situation, it was the "sword" slicing space apart to form an invincible shield that was the more

useful.

“...Children of the gods dwelling within me, guardians of the host, thou who bring victory in the time of the sword, ye who carry the departed!”

As Sayaka was left befuddled, La Folia stepped forward in an attempt to shield her. The song of prayer she intoned echoed beautifully across the battlefield. As if responding to her voice, Sayaka and La Folia came to be surrounded by a blue glow of spiritual light reminiscent of a glacier.

That glow obstructed each and every attack the Oceanus Girls had unleashed, bouncing the attacks right off it.

“Holy defense barrier...!”

“Warship-class defense barrier confirmed.”

“The Svalinn System’s pseudo-holy shield...!”

One after another, the girls in augmented bunny suits let shocked voices trickle from their lips.

The Svalinn System, a secret ritual of the kingdom of Aldegia, was said to be the pinnacle of defensive magic. The bulwark created by divine essence supplied by a spiritual reactor was special, able to repel vampiric Beast Vassals and physical attacks simultaneously. All by herself, La Folia was deploying a barrier equal to that of a spiritual reactor equipped by a large-scale warship.

“...I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee!”

A chant escaped Sayaka’s lips. The silver long sword split forward and back, transforming into a recurve bow.

At that point, she knew what the princess had meant by the bow rather than the sword. Now that the princess had deployed a defensive barrier, the duty she desired from Sayaka was not that of a shield, but that of a ritual spell gun turret to smite their foes.

“Vika, retreat!” the girl in the blue augmented bunny suit called out to her blond beauty teammate.

“Urk...!”

Biting her lip in chagrin, the girl in the red bunny suit cast her machine guns aside, but before she could escape, Sayaka finished preparing for bombardment.

“Most Brilliant Flaming Horse, Illustrious Kirin, He Who Governs Heavenly Thunder, pierce these evil spirits with thy wrath...!”

The silver recurve bow fired a metallic ritual arrow. The whistling arrow infused with ritual energy executed a spell chant at super-high speed impossible for a human. A giant magic circle was drawn against the sky above. Pouring down from this was a storm of thunderbolts beyond counting, accompanied by high-density, debilitating miasma.

Victory and defeat were decided in an instant.

The cry of the girls in bunny suits echoed all across the ruined city. Lustrous Scale was an area-suppression weapon—an armament for neutralizing an entire battalion of demons. Even with the mobility provided by exoskeletons, they could not escape the ritual spell barrage. With high-density miasma and thunderbolts pouring right down upon them, all the Oceanus Girls tumbled helplessly to the ground.

They probably wouldn’t be getting up for the next twelve hours, at least. Even if it was technically on the battlefield, Sayaka couldn’t shake the feeling that such conduct toward foreign princesses was somehow excessive. As if seeing right through Sayaka’s regrets, La Folia exhaled in a show of exasperation.

“My, my. You really let them have it, Sayaka.”

“And just whose fault is that?!” Sayaka retorted in a ragged tone of voice.

During that momentary opening, something leaped out from the shadow of rubble from a ruin. It was a crimson Micro Robot Tank about the size of the average car. Crouching down upon its shell-like armor was a little girl wearing a beret. Wings woven from demonic energy spread from her back, and a black tail jutted out from the hem of her short skirt. Sayaka knew her well.

“Yume Eguchi...! You’re fine with us not chasing her...?” Sayaka looked back and posed the question to La Folia.

If Yume was the succubus controlling Leviathan, it was pretty much certain to

Sayaka that it was the pilot of that red robot tank—Lydianne Didier—directing the Nalakuvera. If they could capture both, the Legacy of Cain’s defense net would crumble.

However, with Sayaka ready to rush out after them, La Folia strongly held her put.

“This is not over, Sayaka.”

“Eh...?!”

Sayaka’s movements came to a halt, dragged back by La Folia’s surprising strength. After a second’s delay, demonic energy emerged above their heads so vast that they could feel a physical shock wave from it. In the blink of an eye, the demonic energy coalesced into a single bird of prey.

It was an enormous raptor made of incandescent fire—a vampire’s Beast Vassal.

“Irrlicht!”

Baring claws of fire, the bird of prey dove down. Its target was the Svalinn System’s bulwark that La Folia had deployed.

The collision between enormous demonic energy and spiritual energy made the very air creak.

The glowing-blue bulwark shattered, unable to withstand the pressure against it. La Folia’s barrier, boasting defenses equal to that of a capital ship, had been smashed apart by a vampiric Beast Vassal capable of destroying even battleships.

“So even the Svalinn System could not withstand it...”

Showing no sign of being unnerved, La Folia gently let a strained smile slip.

A silver-haired vampire stood before the princess—Tobias Jagan of the Warlord’s Empire. The girls in the bunny suits were merely the opening act. He was no doubt Yume Eguchi’s real protector.

“As expected of you, Count Jagan. However, do you not think it rather rude to intervene in a dispute between graceful young women?”

“Don’t take this personally, La Folia Rihavein. It may seem underhanded to you, but victory is obtained through smashing with superior firepower. Such is war.”

Even in the face of the princess’s reproachful words, Jagan’s expression did not budge.

Sayaka put strength into the hands with which she gripped her recurve bow. Tobias Jagan was Vattler’s close confidant, a vampire known to be particularly militant even by the Warlord’s Empire standards. Defeating him single-handedly would probably take a vampire equal or superior to Vattler or Aradahl. Even with Sayaka and La Folia together, the odds of them being able to withstand his strength were very low.

La Folia surely understood this. Even so, she did not lose her composure, neither in her actions nor her voice. Sayaka was slightly late in realizing why.

There was someone gazing down at Jagan facing off against the two girls from far above.

“I agree, Tobias Jagan—”

“What...?!”

The voice arrogantly echoing from the sky made Jagan gasp and look up.

Illuminated by the midday sun, a single armored airship floated in the azure sky. It was smaller than the *Böðvildr*, but the hull had a more offensive-oriented silhouette.

The outer wall was colored a beautiful cobalt blue. The emblem drawn upon it was that of a golden eye—the emblem of Fallgazer, he who ruled the Fallen Empire, Dominion of the Middle East.

“Then you cannot complain about my lending these two a hand—”

With a golden mist of demonic energy hovering around him, a golden-eyed boy vampire descended.

No one was surprised to see him. He was member of the HGTO, one of those who had vouched for Kojou Akatsuki’s identity and status—and a combat maniac no less than Vattler. To him, sitting back and watching while a war

unfolded right before his eyes was simply unthinkable.

“I am most honored to face you in battle. You have my thanks, Iblisveil Aziz!”

Glaring at the prince descending onto the battlefield, Tobias Jagan bared his fangs.

Sensing the vampires’ demonic energy colliding behind them, Sayaka and La Folia ran out in pursuit of Yume and Lydianne.

8

Kojou and Yukina continued running through the streets of the silver-colored ruins. To the vampirized Kojou, running ten kilometers’ distance was no great feat. The same went for Yukina, her physical capabilities enhanced via ritual spell. However, that was provided one knew the correct route.

“Shit... We’re completely lost. It’s hard to know your way through this damn city!”

Kojou spat venom as he cast aside the military-spec tablet Aradahl had handed them. It certainly was displaying the location of the *Oceanus Grave II*, but it was a map meant for an aircraft. It was virtually useless for examining the layout of city streets, rendering it mere dead weight.

“I am sorry. Due to the earlier ritual spell bombardment’s aftereffects, I am unable to employ *shikigami* for searching...”

Yukina’s breaths were lightly labored as she cast her eyes downward with a constrained expression. It had only been ten minutes prior when a ritual spell barrage had scattered thunderbolts onto the opposite side of a canal. Engulfed in the miasma that had descended with it, the reconnaissance *shikigami* Yukina had dispatched had been completely wiped out.

“That really was an arrow from Sayaka’s bow, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I believe that Sayaka using Lustrous Scale means that she was fairly hard-pressed. And Yume’s mental wave has been interrupted as well—”

“On this island, I can’t get a smartphone signal to get in touch with Kirasaka,

either...”

Kojou clicked his tongue as he glanced down at his phone displaying an out-of-range signal.

“Anyway, we’d better look for where the *Oceanus Grave II* is. Must be good high ground for that somewhere—”

Coming to a standstill, Kojou surveyed the area for a building that seemed reasonable to climb.

It was a moment later that an oddly shaped vehicle rushed out together with a violent *screech*. It was by no means extravagantly huge, but it was a mass of steel and reinforced plastic plenty big enough to instill fear into any human being on foot who saw it.

“Nuoah, Sir Boyfriend!”

“Mister Kojou?!”

The robot tank kicked up a grating, steel noise as it urgently came to a halt.

Judging from the look on Yume’s face, the girls were right in the middle of fleeing. However, from Kojou’s point of view, encountering the girls was a godsend. Capturing the pair would neutralize Leviathan and the Nalakuvera then and there.

“Himeragi, don’t let them get away—!”

“Right!”

Before Kojou even finished his words, Yukina ran out in the direction of the robot tank.

Having Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor, seen capturing a pair of primary schoolers posed various issues, but there were no such concerns if he left it to Yukina. However, as Yukina headed toward them, Yume apologetically brought both hands together.

“I’m sorry, Miss Yukina...!”

“Eh?!”

Yukina’s face stiffened as the robot tank swiveled gun barrels in her direction.

These were 7.62 mm anti-personnel machine guns embedded in both front legs.

“?!”

“Whoaaa!”

Yukina instantly took cover behind a building as the machine guns roared and spat out plastic bullets meant for riot suppression. The plastic bullets violently collided with the walls of ruined buildings, turning into ricochets that assaulted Kojou from unexpected directions.

“You trying to kill me?!”

Kojou shouted in anger toward Yume and Lydianne as he evaded the bullets pouring down. Plastic or no, firing them with the same means as regular machine-gun rounds made them strong enough to break bones in a human body. In terms of efficient infliction of pain, the weapons were scarier to a vampire than regular guns.

“I am most sorry! However, we cannot alloweth ourselves to be captured as of yet—!” Lydianne shouted over the speakers as she spun the tank around.

They meant to make a run for it, and neither Kojou nor Yukina had any effective means of stopping them. Since it didn’t employ demonic energy, Yukina’s spear was powerless against it, and Kojou’s Beast Vassals were far too powerful to use against a pair of young schoolgirls.

So do we just twiddle our thumbs and watch those two go...? Kojou was about to give up when rainbow-colored wings spread before the robot tank’s route of advance.

Appearing from a ripple-like shift in the air was a small girl wearing an extravagant, thoroughly out-of-place dress and a homunculus girl wearing a maid outfit.

“Astarte. Get them—”

“Accepted. Execute, Rhododactylos.”

Accepting Natsuki Minamiya’s command, Astarte summoned her Beast Vassal.

The rainbow-colored wings protruding from her back gradually changed into enormous arms. Furthermore, it enveloped the entire body of Astarte, its host and master, changing into a completely humanoid form. This was the true face of Astarte: an experimental, artificial, symbiotic life-form—the world’s one and only homunculus within whom a Beast Vassal dwelled.

“What the...?!”

Physical attacks were ineffective against Astarte’s Beast Vassal, Rhododactylos. All the plastic bullets fired from the robot tank did was bounce futilely off the humanoid Beast Vassal’s surface.

In contrast, both of the Beast Vassal’s arms pinned down the robot tank, bringing its movements to a halt. Astarte’s Beast Vassal ripped off the robot tank’s legs with ease equal to that of plucking legs from a boiled crab.

Also, as Yume rode the tank’s back, silver-colored chains shot out of thin air to entwine around her entire body. Yume desperately flailed her limbs, about to somehow escape from the spell, but this only resulted in the chains entwining her tighter. The skirt of her one-piece uniform rose higher, exposing her white thighs and her tail.

“A final request...! The storage...at least spareth the storage! The backup hath not been finished yet!”

“Let me...let me go! Mister Kojou is going to see...!”

Natsuki grandly ignored the two elementary schoolers’ tearful pleas. During that time, Astarte silently continued dismantling the robot tank.

Oh, geez. Kojou scratched his head as he rose to his feet. “...So Natsuki came, too, huh?”

Natsuki snorted briefly.

“It is not as if I came to rescue you. I am merely apprehending these young girls at the behest of the succubus’s guardian. Incidentally, their primary school homeroom teacher is an acquaintance of mine, so I should be able to have her prepare special chastisement.”

Yume’s and Lydianne’s faces changed color when the girls heard Natsuki’s

remarks. The talk of having their homeroom teacher scold them seemed to have quite the effect.

“P-please waiteth, Lady Sensei! Mercy! The mercy of a warrior—”

“Nooooooooo!”

Natsuki opened a teleportation gate, and Astarte tossed the pair of elementary schoolers in.

Consequently, this ensured Yume and Lydianne’s safety, at least for the time being. They’d launched a war against the Holy Ground Treaty Organization; if it stopped at a little chastisement, they were getting away lightly.

And just like that, the menace of Leviathan and the Nalakuvera had vanished in a puff of smoke. The only enemies remaining within the Legacy of Cain were Vattler and the vampires under him.

“...Natsuki, could you take me as far as Vattler’s ship?”

In a sober tone, Kojou made a plea to Natsuki, her official duty already at an end.

The small-statured witch looked back at Kojou and sank into thought. Natsuki’s formal status was that of a Federal Attack Mage under the Government of Japan. No doubt troublesome diplomatic constraints prevented her from opposing Vattler head-on. Her position was different than Yukina’s, who could use the excuse that she was merely observing Kojou.

However, in the end, Natsuki sighed, resigning to compromise.

“Well, that should be fine. This stupid ruckus he’s kicked up has been getting somewhat tiresome.”

“Thanks.”

An unwitting look of relief came over Kojou. That instant, Yukina’s expression hardened as she poised her silver spear.

“Ms. Minamiya, I am sorry. Please go on ahead of us.”

“...Himeragi?”

When Kojou prompted, wondering what was up, he saw a crimson beam fly

out from a corner of his vision. Flying without a sound was a bullet that struck Astarte's Beast Vassal down from behind.

However, as Kojou and the others turned to see, something was happening to the rainbow-colored Beast Vassal before their very eyes. The right arm of Rhododactylos, capable of reflecting demonic energy and nullifying physical attacks, split apart like a mosaic and vanished.

"Astarte?!"

"Warning. I cannot defend against this bullet—it is dangerous."

The homunculus girl stated it with a neutral expression. Kojou and Yukina gaped at her words. Further vermillion bullets poured down, seemingly clawing into Astarte's Beast Vassal as they dismantled it.

The power to rewrite the world itself, to erase the very existence of supernatural power—Kojou knew this attack.

"These bullets... The Cleansing?!"

Kojou looked up at the sight of a new robot tank on top of a building. A vibrant, turquoise-blue emblem had been painted onto the inorganic gray frame.

From the open cockpit hatch, the upper body of a high school girl with an extravagant hairstyle popped out.

"Asagi...!!"

Kojou called out the girl's name.

Yes. The remaining enemies were not vampires alone. There was one other—the worst, and most powerful, foe of all.

Surely she could truly master The Cleansing, the forbidden magic Cain had created to rewrite the very world. After all, she was the world's one and only Priestess of Cain.

"I shall restrain Aiba. Senpai, during that time, get to the Duke of Ardeal! Quickly!"

The silver spear gave off a dazzling glow as Yukina glared at Asagi.

Kojou's back teeth clenched as he closed his eyes, as if in prayer.

"Counting on you, Himeragi."

9

Slipping through space that swayed like distilled dizziness, Kojou landed on the deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*. The expected interception attack from Vattler did not arrive. The surface of the ship was filled with nothing but a bizarre silence.

"The anti-intruder barrier has been lifted... Do you intend this as an invitation, Master of Serpents?" Natsuki murmured as she surveyed the area. Kojou felt a faint stirring in his chest. The fact that they'd been permitted to teleport so easily to the supposed headquarters of the Anti-HGTO Military made it feel less like a trap than a genuinely defenseless ship.

He could sense no sign of the Holy Ground Treaty Organization non-signatory nations' representatives that should have been aboard the ship or their bodyguards. In their place was a strange scent hovering inside the ship that smelled like iron.

"This scent... Don't tell me...!"

Kojou's entire body shook violently. He covered his mouth, making a low groan as he resisted the urge to vomit.

"...Akatsuki?"

Kojou's extraordinary reaction made Natsuki suspiciously narrow her eyebrows. However, neither she nor Astarte had yet noticed the strange scent coursing from within the ship, for they were not vampires—

"Shit... Vattler...!"

Kojou kicked down a nearby door and rushed inside the ship.

The strange scent grew thicker still. It was the scent of human blood.

He recognized the extravagant bar lounge in which he caught sight of people lying in a heap. Fresh blood was coursing from the people who lay around him,

spread wide like shadows cast by the setting sun.

“Representatives from HGTO non-signatory nations, I see. They are still alive, barely. But...”

Having chased after Kojou, Natsuki grimaced as she raised a sour voice. Astarte immediately began administering first aid, but the casualties were simply too numerous.

The fallen were affluent politicians and black-suited bodyguards. All lay with their respective throats torn, causing them to lose a great deal of blood. When Kojou searched in earnest, they numbered over a hundred. If he did a full search of the ship, he would probably find several times more.

However, compared to the gravity of their wounds, very little blood had splashed onto the floor. This indicated that the one who had inflicted these wounds had consumed the vast majority of the blood that had flowed out of them. The tragedy had no doubt played out behind Asagi’s back.

“What’s the meaning of this, Vattler...?!” Kojou snarled, violently pounding a fist against the ship’s inner wall.

Opposed to the Holy Ground Treaty Organization, the non-signatory nation representatives were allies there at Vattler’s invitation. Vattler had personally attacked his own comrades in arms. Kojou didn’t think even a cruel fighting-obsessed man like Vattler would do something like that without a reason behind it.

“Their reward for desertion before the enemy—”

The reply came from a youthful vampire’s soft voice.

“...?!”

Kojou shifted his eyes in the direction of the voice. A blond, young aristocrat was standing right beside a piano at the back of the bar lounge. His pure-white suit was marred with blood spatter.

“They’d grown weak in the knees at having earned the Fourth Primogenitor’s ire. They tried to run, so I passed judgment. Is it not a suitable end for cowards that would sully our sacred battle?”

The ghastly aura rising from his entire body made Kojou back away without being aware of it.

The mask of the annoying, sarcastic strategist had been cast aside. The true face of the aristocrat of the Warlord's Empire had come to the fore.

This cruelty and violence was Dimitrie Vattler's true nature. So long as he remained undefeated, Itogami Island would never know peace.

"Natsuki... Astarte... Hurry and get these people to a hospital."

"What?"



“I’m sending this jerk packing—!”

As Kojou thrust his right arm out, crimson mist surged out of it. This mist transformed into an incredible torrent of demonic energy, which then took the form of an enormous beast. Simultaneously, the shadow of an enormous, phantasmal beast floated in front of Vattler. The two simultaneously summoned Beast Vassals collided head-on inside the ship.

“Regulus Aurum!”

“Batsunanda!”

Kojou had summoned a lightning lion that glowed brilliantly. Its lightning-imbued attack was blocked by a serpent Beast Vassal with countless swordlike scales. The resulting shock wave blasted the cruise ship’s upper deck away. But both Kojou and Vattler were unharmed. When Vattler flew through the enormous hole gouged into the ceiling on his way topside, Kojou instantly pursued.

“Al-Nasl Minium! Cor-Tauri Succinum—!”

The shock wave unleashed by the scarlet bicorn ripped the top deck apart, and from magma spat out by the minotaur came an enormous ax with which it attacked Vattler.

“Manashi! Shakala—!”

Vattler summoned two new Beast Vassals with which he parried Kojou’s attacks. However, Kojou’s attacks did not end there. Twisting Vattler’s counterattack down with pure force, his defenses were pulverized obstinately, cunningly, cruelly, savagely, coarsely, and mercilessly, one-sidedly pounding his attacks home. All at once, countless wounds were carved into Vattler’s suit, and fresh blood spurted from his torn skin.

“I barely recognize you, Kojou... Aradahl honed you well.”

What rose to the corners of Vattler’s blood-drenched cheeks was a smile of pure delight.

Even while being peppered with Kojou’s attacks, Vattler was smiling.

“Yes, Kojou! This is the power of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor,

said to rival natural disasters! Show me, show me more!”

“Shut the hell up!”

Hit by a shock wave unleashed by the bicorn, Vattler’s body sailed into the sky. He was sent flying several hundred meters and touched down atop a ruin on the artificial isle.

Kojou leaped in pursuit of him.

Enveloped in Kojou and Vattler’s fighting, the once-beautiful *Oceanus Grave II* had changed into something that almost felt cruel to look at. The bridge and observation deck had vanished without a trace, and innumerable cracks ran across the hull, to the point Kojou found it mysterious that the ship remained afloat. Though concerned for the casualties still inside the ship, all he could do was pray that Natsuki and Astarte had safely rescued them.

“So enjoyable, Kojou. Truly, this has brightened my mood...”

Though wounded in intense combat, Vattler spread both arms wide in a theatrical gesture. His gaze was aimed not at Kojou but at the multinational armada floating far off at the water’s horizon.

“I really would love to continue playing with you like this, but some very scary people are watching, you see. I suppose it is finally time for me to test my new power—”

“What...?!”

Kojou’s expression froze as he instinctively grasped that the air around Vattler had shifted.

An icy chill ran up his spine. He did not know what Vattler was trying to do, but it was clearly something horrible. The Blood Memories of the Fourth Primogenitor bespoke its terror.

A spiraling vortex of vermillion radiance enveloped the Beast Vassals that Vattler had summoned.

This glow was formed of minute particles of light. Complex magical symbols were carved upon their interior sides. As their bodies absorbed the countless particles, Vattler’s Beast Vassals increased in power. The creatures and particles

fused together in perfect harmony, finally transforming into a giant, dazzlingly glowing serpent, hundreds of meters long. From the sky far above, it gazed down upon Kojou—and roared.

“This power! It’s...The Cleansing...?!”

As the vermillion serpent spat out a dazzling beam of light, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal to block it. The bighorn sheep with a body of diamonds deployed a gemstone bulwark in front of Kojou.

This was the Beast Vassal of Retribution, which could block any attack and repel its might back at the opponent—

But the beam of light unleashed by Vattler’s Beast Vassal smashed and pulverized Kojou’s bulwark apart.

“Gu...oa...!”

Hit head-on by the full-force attack, Kojou was slammed into the ground.

Blood erupted from his mouth as well as his freshly opened wounds. The supernatural power-erasing radiance of The Cleansing had robbed Kojou of the demonic energy within him. He could neither summon a new Beast Vassal nor even rise to his feet. His vision darkened as his consciousness wavered.

“Farewell, Kojou...,” Vattler murmured in a tone tinged with what almost sounded like loneliness.

With Kojou deprived of his bulwark, the red beam increased in vigor, pouring down upon him. The power of the Fourth Primogenitor, and Kojou’s very being, would be annihilated—but the moment he thought this...

“Rosen Chevalier Plus, Boot Up—!”

Leaping into the light was Yui Haba, dressed in a swimsuit and a parka. The silver long sword in her grip created a gash in space itself, interrupting the light of The Cleansing.

“Glenda, please!”

“Daaaaaaahhh!”

Letting out a strange roar, a steel-colored dragon flew in, threading its ways

through gaps between the ruined buildings. In the single second before the spatial severing vanished, the dragon picked up Kojou and Yui, proceeding to flee higher into the sky.

“—Freikugel Plus, Full Burst!”

Riding on the dragon’s back, silver-colored recurve bow poised, was Shio Hikawa. Simultaneously, Shio fired her three nocked ritual arrows in a single volley. Sailing off with a roar, the whistling arrows deployed three magic circles simultaneously, unleashing dazzling beams of light, thunder, and a smokescreen of dense mist all at once—

Vattler’s Beast Vassal unleashed vermillion beams of light, erasing the magic circles. But by that time, the steel-colored dragon had already vanished from sight with Kojou in tow.

“It would seem the amusement will run a little longer...”

Releasing his Beast Vassal from its summons, the blond vampire strained a smile. He refrained from immediately pursuing the boy out of respect for the cleverness and courage of the girls who had rescued Kojou from peril.

Besides..., Vattler thought, turning his eyes toward the water’s horizon once more.

His opponents were not limited to the Fourth Primogenitor alone.



CHAPTER SIX HOMECOMING

CHAPTER SIX

HOMEcoming

1

The vermillion bullets trailed beautiful, geometric streaks of light as they flew. In truth, these bullets were collections of light particles enveloping magic symbols within. This was The Cleansing—the forbidden spell wrought by the Sinful God for his revenge against the gods.

The places touched by those bullets were instantly transformed into gold. The Cleansing was a spell that rewrote the world. This was not transmutation of matter; it was rewriting the world so that *it had always been gold to begin with*.

Since The Cleansing interfered with the world itself, Snowdrift Wolf's Ability to nullify demonic energy was ineffective against it. Yukina's spear could not block the red bullets.

Even so, Yukina did not falter, slipping her way through the bullets as they poured down like rain.

"Aiba! Please stop this!"

Yukina was staring toward the robot tank that Asagi was piloting. It was a bluntly designed machine, a fair bit larger than Lydianne's Hizamaru.

The scarlet bullets were being fired from the two antipersonnel machine guns with which the machine came equipped. Unable to use magic herself, Asagi was using the robot tank as a catalyst to draw upon the power of The Cleansing. The attack patterns were more limited compared to ones controlled by a spellcaster herself, but in contrast, the lag between shots was minimal. The mobility and defensive power of the robot tank itself was more menacing still.

"Provided senpai defeats the Duke of Ardeal, we can save Itogami Island

without a war!”

Using a ritual spell to physically enhance herself to the absolute limit, Yukina chased after the robot tank. Offensive spell tablets she spread in midair transformed into silver-colored wolves. The two wolves grabbed hold of the tank, attempting to crush the antipersonnel machine guns with their jaws.

“Like I’ve been saying, that makes this all meaningless!”

Crashing her own machine into the wall of a ruin, Asagi shook Yukina’s *shikigami* off. Showered in the special bullets, the *shikigami* lost their supernatural power, returning to the spell tablets from whence they came.

“Say Kojou becomes king of Itogami Island as the Fourth Primogenitor. What happens to him after?! Can he go back to being a normal high school student then?! Saving Itogami Island by sacrificing his sense of belonging, that’s no solution to anything! Don’t take away Kojou’s home!”

“Aiba...don’t tell me that’s why you’ve chosen to cooperate with the Duke of...”

Learning Asagi’s true feelings for the very first time, Yukina’s movements halted for a moment.

Now that she thought about it, everything made perfect sense.

Asagi was an ordinary high school girl who just happened to be a little better with computers than other people. There was no reason she’d be capable of deciding to make enemies of half the world *just* to protect the island on which she was raised. It was not Itogami Island that Asagi was protecting, but Kojou’s place to come home to. From the beginning, she’d been acting for Kojou’s sake alone.

Yet, even once she knew Asagi’s true feelings, Yukina did not lower her blade.

“Senpai...! He *chose* to protect Itogami Island even so! Even if it means his identity is exposed, even if it means shouldering the destiny of its entire populace—!”

“I told you: I’m not letting that happen!”

Micro-missiles scattered from the missile pods on the tank’s back.

The left and right sides of the craft each shouldered a twenty-four-barreled missile pod. From every direction, a total of forty-eight missiles bore down upon Yukina alone. Even the Sword Shaman, with her Ability to peer into the future, could not escape a physical attack from every conceivable angle.

“Urk—”

The silver spear Yukina gripped unleashed a dazzling, pale light. The spiritual energy Yukina amplified through her spear coursed backward into her body. The purified spiritual energy opened Yukina’s internal pathways to a higher dimension, and what coursed back through these pathways was vast divine essence exceeding all human limitations. This was a side effect of the Divine Oscillation Effect ritual from within Snowdrift Wolf—Faux-Angelification of its wielder.

The outpouring of divine essence formed pale wings that mowed down every last missile flying through the air.

“Sh...she shot down The Cleansing’s bullets...?!” Asagi exclaimed in shock.

The crimson particles embedded into the missiles were being dissipated by Yukina’s wings. Even The Cleansing could not erase divine essence coursing in from a higher dimension.

“Whether senpai is Fourth Primogenitor or king of a Dominion, isn’t that fine?! I will protect senpai’s place here! That is why I am in this Demon Sanctuary... That is why I am his watcher!”

Advancing down the path of Faux-Angelification was a dangerous act that culminated in the final annihilation of the mage. Her pact with Kojou had diminished that possibility, but even its effect had its limits. Yukina had put her divine essence to maximum throttle with full knowledge of that fact, for she knew it was her one and only means of resisting Asagi.

“What the hell are you...?!”

Yukina’s declaration made Asagi’s voice tremble. For once, she was genuinely unnerved.

“And what’s with those wings?! What are you, an angel?! What, you have a cute face, so the rules don’t apply to you?!”

“Aren’t you the cute one, Aiba?! They say you’re more beautiful than actual idols! And smart! And stylish! And senpai depends on you!!” Yukina retorted, baring her own emotions as well. She no longer had any idea what she was saying.

Regardless, it seemed to have rubbed Asagi the wrong way, for the tone of her voice jumped higher still.

“Hey, you’re the one Kojou depends on! I don’t know about this watcher business, but whether it’s the high school or the middle school campus, you’re always together, lovey-dovey, lovey-dovey, lovey-dovey!”

“Aren’t you clinging to him at high school all the time, Aiba?! You’re always glancing at the side of his face in the middle of class, you eat lunch with him at noon, you even indirectly kiss him by sharing drinks—”

“How do you know that?!”

Asagi’s robot tank collided with Yukina. The resulting impact sent sparks flying from the robot tank’s joints. Lubricant flowed out from various parts of the machine, and overheating sent coolant gushing out as white smoke. Both antipersonnel machine-gun barrels were warped in the process, and the remaining missiles were already exhausted.

Crawling out of the cockpit hatch, Asagi glared at Yukina. “And another thing, I never got anything like a ring from Kojou!”

“This ring was provided by the Lion King Agency! It doesn’t hold a candle to your earrings!” Yukina retorted. Anyway, she’d already released her angelification.

“Yeah, you say that, but Kojou put that ring on you, didn’t he?! It’s not fair!”

“What about you, Aiba? Always calling senpai by his given name like that?!”

“Oh... That bothers you? Who would have guessed...”

“Ngh...”

Realizing her own verbal slip, Yukina’s cheeks flushed as she averted her gaze.

Without a word, Asagi shrugged, sighing as she put a hand to her cheek. Perhaps she thought it was all pretty stupid. It wasn’t as if arguing with Yukina

was going to improve the situation in any way.

And then...

“_____?!”

In shock, Yukina and Asagi looked to the sky in the direction where Kojou ought to have been fighting Vattler. Rising high in the sky was a serpent stretching hundreds of meters long.

Even for a vampiric Beast Vassal, its enormity was off the charts.

Beast Vassals themselves were concentrated masses of dense demonic energy. When materialized, even the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were dozens of meters long at best. Yet still, they possessed the might to wipe entire cities off the map. Yukina could not even imagine what kind of destruction would be wrought if that serpent released all of its demonic energy at once. What horrified her even more was the vortex of scarlet light swirling around the serpent.

“—Why is The Cleansing...?! I didn’t program anything like that...!” Asagi shook her head, aghast.

Yukina was completely at a loss for words. At that point, Dimitrie Vattler had achieved total mastery of The Cleansing. And he had infused that capability into his own Beast Vassal. He was using the world-rewriting power of The Cleansing to augment it.

To make matters worse, he was not limited to only one Beast Vassal.

One after another, the curved necks of enormous serpents rose up, scattered across the ruined city. The eight serpentine Beast Vassals that Vattler possessed were emerging all over the artificial isle, haughtily gazing down upon their surroundings.

It was a surreal spectacle that felt as if they were watching the end of the world.

As if desperately trying to escape from that horde of Beast Vassals, a single bird danced in the sky.

No—it was no bird. It was a dragon with a steel-colored mane.

The dragon's right and left front claws held a boy and a girl, respectively. Recognizing their appearances, Yukina and Asagi raised their voices.

"Miss Glenda...?! Senpai?!"

"K-Kojou and...Yui?!"

Yukina and Asagi could only watch as the dragon, flying at a speed beyond its limits, lost its balance, fluttering as it fell into a gap between some buildings. They faintly heard the sound of girls crying out.

"...!"

The two met each other's faces. Then, they ran toward where the dragon had crashed.

2

"To think a New Blood less than two hundred years of age could trade blows with me to this extent... Quite impressive."

A giant sword Beast Vassal continued to hover above Velesh Aradahl's head as he quietly spoke.

Countless scars had been left in the landscape of the steel-colored ruin, seeming as if invisible fangs had gouged holes into it. These were traces of two vampires wielding vast power having clashed head-on.

Aradahl's flesh was covered in cuts. The sleeves of his old-fashioned coat had been cruelly burned black. However, the wounds of Kira Lebedev, standing before him, ran far deeper. He had already lost his right arm, and he bore grievous wounds all over his body. Some looked as if he had been impaled so deeply that the wounds ran all the way to his back.

Aradahl and Kira were separated by about seven hundred years—the varying degrees in damage reflected the difference in combat experience between them. Nor was further combat likely to alter the course of the battle.

Even so, Kira had not lost his will to fight. In contrast to Aradahl, whose Beast Vassals outnumbered his, he employed illusions and traps, obstinately hanging

on.

“Why do you fight for Vattler’s sake to this extent, Kira Lebedev? I do not think you are as deeply committed to fighting like Vattler and Jagan, and yet...”

“I wonder about that...”

Kira smiled a bit as his own blood drenched his cheeks. Seeing that Kira was hiding his chest under his torn clothing, Aradahl narrowed his eyes with a suspicious air.

“But what I do bear is a sentiment that...this is the only way I could come up with to be of aid to him... And once more, it would seem I have fulfilled my duty.”

“What?”

Upon hearing Kira’s suggestive remark, Aradahl lifted his face. In the direction of the *Oceanus Grave II*—where Kojou Akatsuki had purportedly been heading—an enormous serpent was being born.

The serpentine Beast Vassal, shrouded by a crimson vortex, burst into the heavens. Aradahl instinctively knew what it was.

“Vattler...infused the power of The Cleansing into his Beast Vassals...!”

As if responding to Aradahl’s words, the serpent Beast Vassal spat out a beam of light.

The crimson beam stretched forth toward the HGTO Military’s multinational armada. The Beast Vassal’s attack, imbued with vast demonic energy, could probably annihilate even the largest aircraft carrier in one blow.

But just before that light engulfed the armada, an enormous, irregularly shaped monster split the sea as it emerged. It was a sea monster with malevolent wings and countless tentacles—a Beast Vassal controlled by a primogenitor.

The Beast Vassal’s wings blocked the beam, altering its course and deflecting it up into the sky.

The collision of vast demonic energies created ferocious waves upon the sea’s surface, but the warships floating behind it were safe. The primogenitor’s Beast

Vassal had just barely managed to protect the multinational armada.

“That’s our primogenitor for you. He masterfully deflected that blow...but how long can he keep it up?”

Kira quietly let out a sigh. Was it a sigh of admiration or of pity?

The enormous wings of the primogenitor’s Beast Vassal, torn off at their base, dissipated. A number of its tentacles seemed to have been lost as well. Even the nigh-invincible Beast Vassal of a primogenitor had been unable to completely withstand the vermillion beam containing the power of The Cleansing.

The serpentine Beast Vassal was drawing demonic power from the artificial island to unleash a fresh attack. The sources of The Cleansing’s power were the dragon lines that flowed in the seas surrounding Itogami Island. The capacity of that demonic energy was effectively inexhaustible. Even with the might of a vampiric primogenitor, could such power truly be resisted...?

“Vattler...!”

Aradahl’s expression twisted as he gazed at the despairing sight.

“I see... So your duty was to slow me down.”

Meanwhile, Iblisveil was indeed watching that same preposterous battle.

Vattler had no doubt required a certain amount of time to completely master the power of The Cleansing. For that reason, he had employed Leviathan and the Nalakuvera to keep the multinational armada at a distance.

Now that his objective had been fulfilled, there was no reason for Iblisveil to fight Jagan any longer... For even if Iblisveil defeated Jagan and arrived on Vattler’s doorstep, his chances of victory were slim.

“Victory is ours, Prince of the Fallen Dynasty.” With half his body cruelly mangled, Jagan smiled, clearly proud of his victory. “His Excellency Vattler has obtained power that surpasses that of the Cain of old. Even our primogenitors cannot stop him now.”

“I do not think those fossils will go down so easily,” Iblisveil replied, unmoved, as if it had nothing to do with him.

“Either way, it is unproductive to continue our blood sport any further. Nor do

I wish to miss the long-awaited fight between Kojou Akatsuki and Vattler.”

“Kojou Akatsuki, you say...?”

Jagan’s pain-filled eyes looked up, carefully scrutinizing Iblisveil. He wobbled to his feet on his regenerated legs.

Iblisveil smiled.

“Why are you so surprised? Is it not Kojou Akatsuki’s duty to defeat Vattler, who has obtained the knowledge of Cain? For he is the Fourth Primogenitor—a god-killing weapon created for the express purpose of killing Cain.”

Wrapping his entire body in golden mist, Iblisveil vanished from sight. He seemed genuinely intent on heading off and spectating as Kojou and Vattler battled.

“I bothered to lend him a hand, after all. I shall be most entertained.”

Somehow, Iblisveil’s voice sounded distant at the end.

Jagan pushed up his blood-drenched bangs, murmuring under his breath to no one in particular.

“Kojou...Akatsuki...”

3

“Kojou—!”

It was Asagi who arrived first at the dragon’s crash site. When the robot tank came to a halt, its strength seemingly exhausted, she jumped down from it and rushed to the injured Kojou’s side.

“Asagi...”

Yui Haba, supporting Kojou with her embrace, was half in tears as she looked up at Asagi. Staring at Kojou, whose eyes were still closed, Asagi understood what Yui’s expression meant.

Kojou was in a pathetic state. Both his legs had been torn to shreds, and most of what was below his knees was not in its original shape. Muscles of his left

arm had been shredded off, exposing the largest bone. The reason there was little bleeding despite that was because the sinews around the open wound had been desiccated like a mummy.

Glowing vermillion particles were floating around the wound site. Vestiges of The Cleansing were erasing supernatural power, obstructing his vampiric regeneration ability.

“—This is the High Priestess’s curse,” Asagi murmured as she realized the truth behind the spell that had wounded Kojou. If one thought rationally, it was quite simple.

Asagi had not written any program to augment Vattler’s Beast Vassals. Someone had executed a program in Asagi’s place. On Itogami Island, there was only one person capable of controlling The Cleansing besides Asagi: the High Priestess, former partner of Meiga Itogami—the Priestess of Abel.

A guinea pig of MAR research to bring people back from the dead, she hated everything in that world. If she learned Vattler’s objective was to engulf the world in the fires of war, no doubt she helped him with glee.

“A program that does nothing more than make Cleansing energy amplified from Itogami Island flow into Vattler’s Beast Vassals... It’s so simple that I can’t mess with it from the outside...”

How can this be? Asagi bit her lip. The calculations the High Priestess had put together were barely worthy of being called a program. All she’d done was create a channel for magical energy to flow into. If this was a computer, it would be like bypassing the circuit board and plugging directly into a high-voltage power source.

Fine control of such a thing was a hopeless prospect. For that matter, Asagi was skeptical that, once it had begun, it was even possible to interrupt the flow of such an enormous quantity of magical energy.

The bigger problem being, since the program could not be touched from the outside, Asagi had no way to heal the wounds that had been caused by Vattler’s attack.

“Senpai...!”

As she caught up, Yukina drew in her breath when she saw the fallen Kojou. No doubt Kojou's atrocious state had been a blow to her as well. However, without a word, Yukina shook her head and glanced around the area.

"Yui, where is Shio?"

"Shio said she'll be a decoy until Kojou recovers, then she went all by herself —"

"...!" Yukina's expression hardened.

The enormous serpentine Beast Vassals were raging indiscriminately all over the ruined, gray city. Even Vattler, their host and master, was having a hard time controlling their power. Just the squirms of the light-enveloped Beast Vassals were causing enormous damage to the ruined city.

However, the Beast Vassals' attacks were not pointed in Kojou's direction—thanks to Shio acting as a decoy to draw their attacks away. More precisely, there was no one other than Shio who *could* be a decoy. Only the ritual spell barrages from Freikugel Plus were capable of drawing the serpent Beast Vassals' attention.

"Aiba, please take care of senpai—"

"...Huh?"

Yukina one-sidedly left those words behind, rushing away before Asagi could reply. She was heading off to support Shio. At present, if there was anything that could block the attacks of Vattler's Beast Vassals, it was the divine essence from Yukina's wings as a Faux-Angel.

She knew that even if she stayed behind, she could not save Kojou. That was why she had left Kojou in Asagi's care, for she believed that Asagi was the only one who could save him—

"This is wrong...!"

The silver-haired dragon girl was squeezing the wounded Kojou's hand. Wearing Yui's parka, Glenda had countless abrasions over her whole body, no doubt wounds incurred as she fled from Vattler's Beast Vassals.

"The Cleansing is *Cain's*...! It hurting *Kojou* is just wrong...!"

“Glenda...”

Yui lowered her eyes in visible anguish.

Her silver long sword was half broken, with the remaining body of the blade lacking part of its edge—backlash from fending off an attack from Vattler’s Beast Vassals. The supernatural power-nullifying particles of The Cleansing had passed through the pseudo-spatial severing to inflict damage upon her sword.

Yet, even incurring such peril, Yui and the others had saved Kojou’s life.

Girls that had been merely swept up in the course of events—

And Asagi was one of the conspirators who’d involved them in that war. Well aware of this, she strongly clenched a fist. She knew what she had to do. She needed to bring that stupid war to an end.

“Yui, sorry, but can you and that girl move away for a little bit?”

“Eh? S-sure.”

A confused look came over Yui as she guided Glenda away, putting some distance between them and Kojou.

In their place, Asagi knelt at Kojou’s side. She took a deep breath to calm her feelings, and gently drew her face closer to Kojou’s. Then, Asagi’s palm smacked the defenseless side of his face.

“Kojou, wake up! Wake up, dammit!”

The crisp slap echoed across the ruined city.

Asagi unleashed her merciless palm strike a second and third time. Normally, this was not how one would treat the wounded, but if Kojou remained unconscious, everything was over, either way. It was no time for her to be choosy about her methods.

“A-Asagi?!”

Yui’s eyes bulged as she stared at the incredible scene before her. Glenda was rigid with fear. However, neither girl made any move to stop Asagi, who couldn’t quell the tears running down her face.

“Open your eyes, Kojou!”

Strength drained from the hand with which Asagi had slapped Kojou repeatedly. She grabbed hold of the collar of Kojou's uniform, calling out his name in a tearful voice. She remained like that when a frail voice reached Asagi's ears.

"...Heya...Asagi..."

Kojou's bloodied right hand brushed away the sideswept bangs covering Asagi's cheek. Through her watery eyes, she stared at Kojou's weakly smiling face.

"Crying again, huh...?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? I've never cried in front of you, even o..."

Asagi vigorously rubbed her eyes but swallowed down her words of rebuke to Kojou midsentence. She recalled the backdrop of a dimly lit hospital waiting room.

In that room, there was a girl crying in the hospital all alone...and a dense boy who'd gone out of his way to speak to her. Come to think of it, that was when Asagi had begun to think about Kojou often.

"What the...? Geez, how long are you gonna remember that for...?"

Asagi wiped away her tears once more. Her smudged makeup must have made her face look pretty terrible, but at least she and Kojou were looking rough together. Asagi gently closed her eyes, placing her lips over Kojou's.

"A-Asagi...?"

Asagi's sudden action brought a thoroughly perplexed expression over Kojou. Yuiri's and Glenda's auras conveyed their own surprise. However, the most nervous one there was Asagi herself. She didn't know what to do next. *If I'd known it would come to this, I'd have asked Tanahara or someone for a detailed, step-by-step explanation*, she thought.

"Sorry... I seriously don't know what to do... What would make you happy and stuff...? Maybe, touch my breasts?"

Asagi's mind was reeling as she spoke those words before undoing the buttons of her school uniform. Next, she unhooked her bra. Then, she forced

Kojou's hand to caress her chest.

"Huh...?!"

Light returned to Kojou's hollow eyes. Perhaps that indicated he was feeling better, but Asagi was in no condition to calmly assess the matter.

"Eh...ehh...?!"

Yui, incredibly unnerved, instantly covered Glenda's eyes.

"?!"

Asagi's slightly sweaty skin came into contact with Kojou's palm, cool to the touch. She instantly let out a tiny voice. It didn't feel at all like she'd imagined. Kojou's hand was large, tough and rigid, his fingers strong and a little scary. However, she did not find being touched by him to be unpleasant.

"What do I do...? This is really embarrassing... My heart really might be all aflutter..."

"Wait, what's with you, Asagi...? Why are you doing this all of a...?"

"Um... I want you to drink my blood. It's okay if it's you, Kojou, so...!"

When she actually put it into words, it sounded like an *extremely awkward* confession. She was belatedly assaulted by fear that Kojou would dislike her for it. However, now was no time to blush.

"I don't understand much about this Priestess of Cain stuff, but if you drink my blood, I think you'll gain the power to resist The Cleansing, too, Kojou. That's why—"

"Asagi... So that's why you're doing this..."

A mix of apparent regret and guilt floated up into Kojou's eyes. Asagi hastily shook her head. That wasn't the reason for her actions.

"M-maybe you don't want to do it with me after all this time...but I've tried my best to...make you really see me as cute, Kojou... That's why I..."

"Stop it."

Kojou spoke two short words of rejection. For a second, Asagi's heart stopped.

“.....Huh?!”

While her face was taut, Kojou gently stroked Asagi's hair. His previously blood-drained cheeks reddened as his eyes swayed with visible tension.

“You don't need to say stuff like that. I mean... I think you're cute...because you're you.”

“...!”

Asagi covered her mouth. Normally, she'd say something flippant to gently deflect Kojou's words, but her voice was stuck in her chest. In place of the words, all that flowed were tears.

“A-Asagi?”

Asagi's unforeseen reaction made Kojou nervous. He seemed genuinely flustered, as if he really didn't understand what was happening.

“S-sorry... I'm kind of...relieved...”



After a weak sob, Asagi spoke the words in a delicate voice. Kojou deeply exhaled in relief.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can, but it might hurt a bit at the start.”

“Yeah, It’s fine. I’ll hang in there. Do what you need to do, Kojou...”

Asagi brushed her hair back, exposing her pale neck. Kojou’s lips closed around her neck with unexpected strength. The bite merged with gradual pain to form a single sensation that spread throughout Asagi.

Yui’s eyes seemed to sparkle as she stared.

Her eyes still covered, Glenda tilted her head. “Dah?” she muttered, confused.

4

Shio Hikawa stood on the roof of a ruined building, silver recurve bow raised.

“Let there be light—!”

Pouring in her dwindling spiritual power, she shot a ritual arrow toward the sky. Her target was a serpentine Beast Vassal shrouded by vermillion radiance, so enormous that missing a shot would take considerable effort.

The arrow traced a magic circle in the sky, which then unleashed incredible thunder and beams of light.

Shio’s objective was to lure the Beast Vassals’ attack as far away from Kojou Akatsuki and the others as possible. It was not necessary to cause damage to the Beast Vassals. For that matter, even a direct hit from Freikugel Plus probably would not inflict wounds upon these opponents—

“Figures, this is rough going...”

Shio made labored breaths as she counted the few remaining ritual arrows.

Shio was a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, an expert in curses and assassination. Drawing an enemy’s attention and sniping from a concealed position were some of her specialties. However, that was provided the

opponent was human or an ordinary Demon. Naturally, using herself as a decoy against off-the-scale Beast Vassals reaching hundreds of meters in length was a first for her.

Shio's attacks were ineffective against the Beast Vassals. However, a single graze from the opponent's attacks would vaporize Shio without a trace left behind. Even a single momentary error would be the death of her. Furthermore, she was facing eight opponents. The exceptionally harsh situation was whittling down Shio's mental and physical endurance.

That said, it would be overly cruel to Shio to blame overwork for the accident that settled it.

One Beast Vassal had interfered with another's attack—

Vattler's serpent's attack came into contact with a different serpent, curving the arc of the attack at close to ninety degrees.

"Oh n...!"

Shio was unable to evade the vermillion beam flying at her from an unexpected direction.

In the first place, each attack was strong enough to sink an enormous warship in a single blow. Any single streak of light scattered due to the interference was more than enough to annihilate Shio. All she could do was stand in a daze, her gaze fixed upon the vermillion radiance washing over her—

"Snowdrift Wolf!"

A small girl enshrouded by the dazzling light of the Divine Oscillation Effect wielded her spear to protect Shio. Transparent wings formed of divine essence were floating up from her back.

Surely it was not Shio's imagination that the side of her already pretty face felt positively divine. In her current state, she was toeing the line between humanity and divinity.

"Y-Yukina Himeragi?!"

"Are you all right, Hikawa?!"

Yukina waited for the Beast Vassal's attack to subside before looking back at

Shio.

“I shall buy time from here. Please retreat.”

“No, Himeragi. That divine essence, it’s a side effect of the Schneewaltzer, isn’t it?!”

Shio’s concerns skipped straight to Yukina’s physical condition.

The Demon-Purging Assault Spear Type Seven Schneewaltzer was a powerful divine armament with the side effect of transforming its wielders into Faux-Angels. That was why the Schneewaltzer was sealed away and considered the Lion King Agency’s secret weapon.

It was only recently that Shio and Yuiri had learned of this. And now that she knew, Shio could not expose Yukina to the danger of fading away. Though she didn’t dote on the girl like Sayaka Kirasaka did, Yukina was still her junior in the Lion King Agency all the same.

However, Yukina continued to grip the silver spear as she made a small but stout smile.

“It’s all right. I have this ring, after all—”

“This isn’t the time for fairy-tale talk like that!”

Naturally, Yukina showing off the ring made Shio indignant. Maybe such a thing made her feel better, but she hardly thought a mere ring could prevent Faux-Angelification. Yukina’s large eyes blinked several times in mild nervousness.

“It—it’s not a fairy tale! What I mean by a connection between senpai and me through this ring is a magical link, so—”

“That explanation is totally straight from a fairy tale... I’ll do you a favor and not tell Yuiri about it.”

“Eh? Yuiri...?” Yukina blinked and tilted her head.

As they spoke, one of the serpentine Beast Vassals turned its head in the pair’s direction. Its emotionless, enormous eyes caught sight of Shio and Yukina, and its maw opened to unleash a scarlet beam of light—

An instant before it could, an enormous magic circle was drawn against the sky, spitting out countless thunderbolts to blind the serpent's vision.

"A ritual spell barrage! Kirasaka...?!"

Shio exclaimed as she realized which caster was behind the attack. The only casters capable of unleashing such large ritual spell barrages were Shio and her fellow Shamanic War Dancer, Sayaka.

With the Beast Vassal bathed in that ritual barrage, its attack was delayed. A woman with beautiful silver hair used that brief span of time to walk in front of Shio and Yukina. Shio was very familiar with her, a worldwide celebrity: Princess of Aldegia, La Folia Rihavein—

The beautiful princess extolled as the Second Coming of Freya wielded incredible spiritual energy to deploy a clear-blue bulwark in front of Shio and Yukina.

"Yukina, please lend me your strength."

"Y-yes!"

Yukina, deducing what the smiling princess had in mind, infused her bulwark with divine energy. Originally, becoming a Faux-Angel was a ritual passed down within the Aldegian Royal Palace. The compatibility between the bulwark spread forth by the Aldegian princess and Yukina's divine essence was exceptionally high.

The girls' bulwark deflected the vermillion beam of the serpent Beast Vassal, sending it bouncing off at an angle.

"Yukina, what of Kojou Akatsuki? Is he safe?"

Sayaka gripped her silver recurve bow as she asked Yukina the question. Yukina was still reinforcing the bulwark when she looked back a little hesitantly, as if trying to choose her words. She wasn't sure whether to convey the extent of Kojou's wounds.

"He is...in Aiba's hands for the moment."

"Eh?! Is—is that going to be all right...?!"

Yukina's roundabout explanation made Sayaka's expression cloud over. She

gave off the impression of being worried about something that didn't quite pertain to Kojou's physical condition.

"Yes...well, probably... Um, senpai was on the verge of death, so...I really cannot take issue with..."

A similar expression came over Yukina as she made that fractured reply. It sounded like a wife and a mistress discussing a cheating husband. *Don't make this so hard for Yuiri*, thought Shio, sighing.

"With the Priestess of Cain... I see, that may well prove a wise decision," La Folia said, giving a little "tee-hee" and an amused smile.

Then, she shifted her gaze to the serpentine Beast Vassal standing tall on the other side of the bulwark. Realizing that its attack had been warded off, the serpent was trying to unleash a red beam toward Shio and the others once more.

"The issue being: Just how can we get ourselves out of this situation...?"

However unyielding La Folia and Yukina's bulwark, it could not block a Beast Vassal's attack over and over. Shio and Sayaka had few ritual arrows remaining. She did not think there was any way to flee from Beast Vassal attacks that could reach all the way to the water's horizon. Shio desperately searched for an escape plan while they endured the despairingly overwhelming power being unleashed by the enormous Beast Vassals.

Then—that overwhelming power suddenly dissipated. The air, creaking under the dense demonic energy, relaxed, and color returned to the world.

Gradually, the eight serpentine Beast Vassals thinned, melting into thin air.

"The Beast Vassals...vanished?"

Shio murmured in a daze at how the curtain had so suddenly fallen.

All that was left was the skyline of the ruined city.

5

It was several minutes later when Kojou completely regained consciousness.

He suddenly realized that Asagi, who had so boldly undone her school uniform, was lying upon Kojou's chest, making cute noises in her peaceful slumber.

It wasn't that he was unaware of what had happened. Indeed, that was the problem.

He felt like he'd woken up from a very pleasant dream, but apparently, the dream was real. Kojou went beet red as he recalled the conversation he'd had with Asagi from those vague memories.

As Kojou sat up, he heard an almost deliberate throat clearing from right beside him.

Yui Haba, wearing a swimsuit, was sitting next to Glenda, whose eyes were still covered. For some reason, he felt like Yui, with her honor student ambience, had a slight redness to her cheeks.

"Oh... Yui...?"

"G-good morning, Kojou. B-been a while!"

Yui spoke to him, deliberately wearing a composed, smiling face. Then, she awkwardly let her gaze wander.

"I-it's all right. I didn't watch. I didn't see a thing. Glenda neither."

"R-right."

Wow, she's a really bad liar, thought Kojou, but he was grateful Yui was considerate. Apparently, she was going to act like she hadn't seen anything that happened between Kojou and Asagi.

"Er, Yui, why are you in a swimsuit...?"

"Eh?!"

Yui checked her own outfit and let out a brief yelp. She was wearing a frilly bikini with a rather pretty design. It wasn't particularly exposing, but it still felt like an odd outfit to wear in the middle of a ruined city.

"Y-you've got it all wrong. It's the same outfit I was wearing when I was captured on Blue Elysium. I actually wanted to wear a plainer swimsuit, but I thought that'd make me stand out even worse at Blue Ely, and... S-see, I lent it

to Glenda for now, but I was wearing that parka over it until just earlier... It—it doesn't look weird?"

"Nah, I think it's cute..."

Kojou voiced his honest appraisal without thinking too hard. Indeed, the fairly restrained design of the swimsuit suited Yuiri's trim appearance nicely.

Yui, covering her breasts in embarrassment, glared at Kojou with upturned eyes.

"Haaah... Kojou, you're such a villain... So naughty."

"What for?!" Kojou's voice went ragged at being blamed for no good reason. He was still in that state when Glenda came close and hugged him tight.

"Kojou...! Does it hurt? Do your wounds hurt?"

"Sorry for making you worry, Glenda."

Kojou stroked Glenda's head with his left hand, which had finally healed. His pair of ravaged legs had finally mended to the point of being able to stand on his own two feet. Torn flesh cried out in unending agony across his entire body, but everything seemed tolerable in one way or another.

"Kojou, can you move?"

A serious look came over Yuiri as she peered into Kojou's face. Kojou froze when the cleavage between her surprisingly bountiful breasts, contrasting her neat and tidy appearance, leaped into his vision.

"Yeah, seems to be all right... I'm still a little short on blood, though, so I'm a little wobbly."

"Um, ah, Kojou."

"Mm?"

"If...if my blood will suffice, you could..."

"—Yui!"

Just before she was about to say something, someone called out Yuiri's name. When Kojou lifted his face, his vision beheld a girl with a short bob wielding a silver-colored recurve bow.

“Sh-Shio?!”

Yui backed away from Kojou and Glenda in a panic.

Yukina had returned along with Shio. La Folia and Sayaka followed in their wake. Apparently, the girls had rendezvoused together somewhere unbeknownst to Kojou.

“Senpai, you’ve regained consciousness? Are your wounds...?”

Yukina began rushing over to Kojou in concern, but partway, her movements came to an abrupt halt. Emotion vanished from Yukina’s gaze as it fell upon Asagi, sleeping against Kojou’s chest with her clothes disheveled.

“.....”

“H-Himeragi... Wait, you’re wrong! I didn’t strip her; this was...out of my hands... You’re assigning blame based on a misreading of circumstantial evidence — Witness! I demand the right to call a witness!”

Kojou’s eyes were full of desperation as he sought support from Yui.

Shio glanced at Yui with a questioning look.

“What happened, Yui?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Yui tried to paper it over with a frail laugh. Asagi, still in Kojou’s embrace, might have sensed the ominous atmosphere flowing through the area, for she opened her eyes, rubbing her neck in the process.

“Mm... What is it...? What’s wrong, Kojou.....? Hyaa?!”

Asagi still seemed a bit sleepy when she lifted her face, but let out a yelp when she noticed Yukina and company’s presence. Realizing her uniform was still askew, she emitted a brief, odd-sounding *Nyah!* and hurriedly righted her clothes.

“Er, ah, Himeragi? Why are you...? What about Vattler’s Beast Vassals?”

A perplexed expression came over Asagi as she looked up at the sky. Yukina, too, seemed conflicted as she gave a little shake of her head.

“They suddenly vanished...”

“...Vanished?” Asagi murmured, sharply narrowing her eyes.

Kojou remembered seeing Vattler’s Beast Vassals just before losing consciousness: enormous serpentine Beast Vassals that had absorbed the power of The Cleansing. Even if Vattler had released them from their summons, he didn’t think masses of demonic energy of that extent would just vanish without a trace.

It would be like trying to put out an oil-field fire. Even if the summoning was simple, there should have been no way to release the demonic energy unless it was done gradually over several days.

Even La Folia, with her extensive knowledge, and Sayaka, with her expertise in assassination, seemed unaware of why the Beast Vassals had dissipated.

As if to smash that momentary silence asunder, the small sound of a phone ringing hailed from the robot tank Asagi had been driving. Asagi tilted her head as she rose to her feet, doing a little heave-ho sound as she stuck her head into the tank’s cockpit. When she came down from the tank once more, she had her usual pink smartphone in hand.

The smartphone’s screen was displaying the face of a classmate Kojou knew very well.

“—Yo, Asagi. Nice expression. Did something good happen?”

Motoki Yaze was addressing Asagi in his usual flippant tone. Kojou felt like there was a slight lag to the conversation; maybe the line was running through a Gigafloat Management Corporation orbital satellite.

“Sh-shut up. This is normal, totally normal. More importantly, what the hell do you want?! I’m kind of in the middle of something—”

“Hey, hear me out. This is about that Vattler guy’s Beast Vassals vanishing.”

“...?!”

Asagi drew in her breath with a start. Kojou and Yukina unwittingly perked up their ears.

“Why do you know about that?” Asagi asked in a small voice.

“Nothing big,” said Yaze, as if he was puffing his chest proudly. *“About ten*

minutes ago, we cut off the dragon lines flowing around Itogami Island. I can't say it's completely down to zero, but the threat of The Cleansing should be at a bare minimum right about now."

"—Yaze? Why do you know about The Cleansing...?"

Kojou wedged himself into the conversation. He knew Yaze was deeply related to the people running the Gigafloat Management Corporation, but it was still news to him that Yaze knew top-secret information like that about The Cleansing.

"I'll tell you all about it when this is all over, Bro."

Yaze seemed just a little guilty as he looked back at the surprised Kojou and smiled. Kojou groaned and swallowed down the countless questions rising in his mind. In their place, he asked the one thing that mattered right then.

"Cut off the dragon lines... You can do that?"

"—*That is what I came to do.*"

Speaking those words, a girl with light-olive skin and honey hair moved her pretty face in front of the camera. A youthful, slightly saucy smile suited to her age came over her glossy lips.

Kojou knew her face well.

"Celesta...?!"

"Making a pathetic face as usual, Kojou Akatsuki. Is Plain Girl there with you? And who is that girl with the awful hair? Have the girls in your entourage grown even plainer in my absence?"

Speaking in the same haughty tone as when they first met, Celesta Ciate poured on the insults. Overhearing this, Asagi's temple twitched. The air seemed to crackle.

"Excuse me?! Who the hell are you, some acquaintance of Kojou's?! Just because your hair is a bit pretty, your eyelashes are nice and long, your eyes are big, and your breasts are huge..... Wait, what the hell's with this girl?!"

"Hey, don't blame me!"

Unable to come up with words she could use to disparage Celesta, Asagi grumbled a “Grrr” as she wrung Kojou’s neck in outrage.

“Celesta Ciate...the Bride of the Dark God. I see...,” La Folia murmured as if she understood.

That was when Kojou remembered, too. Once, Celesta Ciate was known as the Bride of the Dark God; this was an alias given to a great calamity born from a distortion of dragon lines. Similar to Beast Vassals, sentient masses of dense demonic energy, spiritual energy accumulated by dragon lines manifested as the Deity of Darkness to spread calamity across their world.

Celesta had been its icon—a special priestess with the power to amass destructive dragon-line energies into the so-called egg of the Deity of Darkness.

“Don’t tell me...you’re planning on creating a new Deity of Darkness?” Kojou stared at Celesta with wide eyes.

Certainly, if she employed her abilities, she could plug the dragon lines in Itogami Island’s environs. All she had to do was temporarily take the energy coursing along those dragon lines and fill her own body with it. However, this was a dangerous gamble that potentially risked giving birth to a new Deity of Darkness.

“I most certainly am not! Therefore, I can only cut off the dragon lines for forty, fifty minutes longer at the most. Please stop Lord Vattler within that time. I do not wish to see him start a war.”

“...Got it.”

Kojou nodded. It wasn’t that Celesta was ignorant of the danger of creating a new evil deity in the Deity of Darkness’s place. Even so, she had lent her power for Kojou’s and Itogami Island’s sakes.

“Thank you, Celesta. That’s a big help.”

“I do not remember doing this for the sake of your appreciation! Lady Giada asked nicely, so I must help; that’s all this is...! Besides, you and Yukina...helped me, so...thank you.”

The last two words came so quickly that they could barely hear them before

Celesta cut off the call from her end.

Celesta's current guardian was Giada Kukulkin, the Third Primogenitor—apparently, she'd seen this coming, so she had lent Celesta to the Gigafloat Management Corporation beforehand.

Using The Cleansing, the Forbidden Ritual of the Sinful God, required the altar dubbed Itogami Island. And what made Itogami Island that altar was the presence of dragon lines flowing through the nearby seas.

During the time they were cut, Vattler could not employ the power of The Cleansing.

The brief span of time during which Celesta's power could hold was their last chance to defeat Vattler, who'd obtained power that rivaled the primogenitors'.

"Forty to fifty minutes left... That's pretty tough."

Kojou murmured as he stared in the direction of the sea. It was hard to imagine that the wrecked *Oceanus Grave II* could move on its own power, but even so, it was a fair distance between there and Vattler's ship. With the remaining time so limited, he wanted to expend as little time changing locations as possible.

"Use this, Kojou."

Asagi, seeing right through the reason for Kojou's gloom, spoke those words as she operated her smartphone. A six-legged mechanical life-form that looked like a beetle emerged, climbing over the top of a mountain of ruin rubble.

"A Nalakuvera...!"

"This one's more of a taxi than a weapon, though."

Asagi puffed out her chest in pride. It should have been obvious, but the Legacy of Cain included not only weapons but ordinary means of transport as well.

"Riding that, though...kinda freaks me out..."

"No complaints," Asagi said. "I'll remotely control the remaining Nalakuvera and tanks to slow Mr. Vattler down. While I do that, take the others and go after him, Kojou." She entered the broken-down robot tank's cockpit.

Kojou nodded as he put his hands on a leg of the parked transport Nalakuvera. Gripping her silver spear, Yukina followed Kojou like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Uhhh... Himeragi?”

“What is it, senpai?”

Yukina bounced the question back at Kojou, finding his surprise rather mysterious.

“No, uh...” Kojou shook his head. “You don’t have to come with me, Himeragi. This time, the opponent’s way too dangerous...”

“There is no time, so please get on board.”

“Uh, but—!”

Briskly dismissing Kojou’s consideration, Yukina climbed into the Nalakuvera before him. As Kojou watched in shock, Yukina glared back at him in a pout as she showed him her silver-colored spear.

“I watch over you, senpai, so of course I will be with you to the end. Besides, please do not forget. Right now, the only thing that can defeat the Duke of Ardeal is Snowdrift Wolf.”

“Well, that’s—”

I suppose she’s right, silently conceded Kojou. Her spear, able to nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier, was a purging spear able to destroy even a primogenitor. The trump card against Vattler had rested in her hands since the beginning.

“Certainly, the rest of us would only slow you down...”

La Folia sank her shoulders in visible dismay as she looked up at Kojou. With a little hop, she leaped onto one of the Nalakuvera’s leg joints, stretched her back, and gently kissed Kojou on his cheek.

“La Folia...”

“Go, Kojou— I shall make preparations for our wedding and await your return.”

“Uh, no, do not make preparations! You say some pretty scary stuff, y’know?!”

Kojou took the princess’s teasing seriously. Her tone was jovial, but La Folia was scary enough that he couldn’t treat anything she said as a joke.

“We’ll be Asagi and company’s bodyguards, then.”

“Dah!”

Yui and Glenda met each other’s faces and nodded.

“Well, if Yui and Glenda say so...,” Shio said as her shoulders sank.

“Kojou Akatsuki. Here.”

Walking with great strides, Sayaka produced a little box with a ribbon around it, seemingly out of nowhere, and thrust it at Kojou. The scent of cocoa bean was wafting up from gaps in the wrapping.

“Th-these are emergency rations, so eat them with Yukina, okay?!”

Sayaka’s cheeks were extremely flushed as she spat the words out. Upon hearing them, Yukina cast her eyes downward, embarrassed for some reason. *Good grief*, said Asagi’s exasperated expression as she turned to Kojou.

“Come back safe and sound, you hear? *To our island.*”

Returning Asagi’s serious stare, Kojou smiled.

His response was brief.

“Leave it to me.”

6

With Kojou and Yukina on its back, the transport Nalakuvera sprinted.

Despite its large size, riding atop its back was an unusually comfortable ride. It felt very much like riding a horse—only faster. To be blunt, riding on the back of a giant beetle sprinting through ruins at nearly a hundred kilometers per hour was frightening. The odd smoothness of the ride only made it more eerie.

Kojou and Yukina were sitting shoulder to shoulder atop the Nalakuvera’s

cargo bed.

No words passed between them. It didn't feel necessary. When Kojou wanted her, Yukina would always be there for him—such went his strange sense of trust.

“I see him.”

Yukina's black hair flapped in the wind as she spoke.

She was staring at a blond, young aristocrat standing in a plaza in front of a tall tower.

Fallen all around him were the remains of robot tanks and Nalakuvera, no doubt ones Asagi had sent to slow Vattler down.

Seeing Vattler standing unharmed from a horde of Nalakuvera, which Kojou had previously defeated with so much difficulty, was a slap in the face, as if to drive home one last time just how frightening the man was.

But really, it hadn't been necessary to slow him down. After all, Vattler had clearly been waiting in that place for Kojou's arrival...

“Vattler...!”

Kojou leaped down from the cargo bed of the halted Nalakuvera. Yukina immediately landed at his side.

The youthful aristocrat slowly raised his face up, looking at the pair with warm eyes.

“So you have returned, Kojou. I've been waiting.”

Kojou nodded, stepping one foot forward.

He remembered the sight displayed before him. The remnants of a highly distinctive building. The markings written with unfamiliar characters. The efficient monorail surrounding the island. Kojou knew this landscape.

He had seen the man who had once stood among these ruins, making his lament.

“This is...”

“Yes. This is where the Fourth Primogenitor killed Cain. Now that I have

obtained the power of The Cleansing, is this not a suitable stage on which to fight you?" Vattler cheerfully curled up his lips.

Kojou quietly stared, pitying him. "Vattler, stop this already... This isn't what Cain wants. Not revenge against the Fourth Primogenitor—and not war."

"...I see. So you have obtained the memories of The Cleansing." Vattler smiled and nodded.

"Right. Cain did not desire war. It was the ancient superhumans—gods known as the Devas—who desired unending war," Kojou gravely pressed. "To those immortals, creating various weapons and causing humankind to slay one another in the glorious act of war was their entertainment."

"...So Cain created The Cleansing to bring those wars to an end." Vattler nodded without a word. Via his knowledge of The Cleansing, he, too, had inherited Cain's memories.

"In fear of this, the Devas placed a watcher over Cain to seal The Cleansing, a god-killing weapon able to slay the immortal Cain—the Fourth Primogenitor."

Vattler's gaze shifted toward Yukina. Perhaps he felt the irony of history repeating itself. The very Fourth Primogenitor that she watched was once Cain's own observer.

"But the Devas miscalculated. His observer, the Fourth Primogenitor, became Cain's one and only friend. And in turn, Cain embraced the Fourth Primogenitor's friendship."

"That's what the gods called Devas were afraid of," Kojou murmured.

"Just so. Hence, they cast a curse upon the Fourth Primogenitor, the program known as Root—and controlled by the personality Root, the Fourth Primogenitor consumed Cain."

"Yeah," said Kojou, biting his lip. Within the memories of Nod, a lonely man had stood amid the ruins. Had that been Cain, or had that been the Fourth Primogenitor who had consumed Cain—?

"Despairing at having slain his friend Cain with his own hands, the Fourth Primogenitor rebelled against the Devas who had created him. Then, he was

torn into twelve pieces and sealed away.” Vattler spread both arms wide, deliberately shaking his head in a show of pity. “Though in the end, the activation of The Cleansing destroyed the Devas all the same... Such a sad and pathetic tale.”

“Not at all,” said Kojou in a strong voice, stopping the young aristocrat’s words short.

“Hmm,” said Vattler, giving Kojou a look of apparent surprise.

“Avrora’s alive. Hektos saved her and Nagisa.”

The artificial vampires dubbed the Kaleid Bloods were the vessels of the Beast Vassals ripped from the Fourth Primogenitor. From among those dolls, born from despair and continuing to live while desiring only to die, emerged one final hope—the Twelfth, Aurora. She lived. She had *wanted* to live.

That was all Kojou needed to firmly declare that their existence had not been in vain.

“Glenda granted me Cain’s dying wish. He left this ark for the sake of his friend, the Fourth Primogenitor—the power...to stop war.”

“But it will become the spark of a new war,” Vattler said, smiling sardonically.

“I won’t let that happen.” Kojou bluntly rejected his words. “I’m sure you’ve already noticed. You can’t use The Cleansing anymore. Right now, you’re just a vampire.”

“Celesta Ciate, is it? The work of Motoki Yaze and the scary grandmother from the Chaos Zone, I take it.”

Vattler raised his voice in an amused chortle. An explosive level of demonic energy exploded from every pore, enough to make even Kojou wince.

“But none of that matters to me now. At long last, I can fight you in earnest. It would be boring to use The Cleansing, would it not? ’Nanda! Batsunanda...!”

“What?!”

The two serpents summoned by Vattler spiraled and intertwined, transforming into a single, enormous dragon.

It was a dragon with scales of swords and a mane of flames. The dragon spun its serpentine body as it descended, and Kojou and Yukina split up to evade its forelegs. The place the pair had stood but a moment before split apart with a great rumble. A crevice had been gouged down into the ground dozens of meters, so deep that the bottom was not visible.

“What’s with that strength?!”

“The Duke of Ardeal’s Fusion Beast Vassal...!”

Shocked expressions came over Kojou and Yukina.

This was a special Ability belonging to Vattler alone: that of fusing two Beast Vassals to create a new Beast Vassal. The Fusion Beast Vassal thus created might equal to a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal, or perhaps more—

In the past, Vattler had employed that power to devour higher-ranking vampires several times over.

“I’ve been bored all this time. I was sick of it. The foolish repetition of history. The unchanging landscape of the world. A work of art or a culture, however magnificent, shall fade and turn to dust in time.”

Flames spewed out by the dragon Beast Vassal dyed the ruined city red. The serpentine body carved more deep fissures in the ground as it undulated. Within the burning ruin, Vattler’s loud laughter continued.

“Suffering and blood, screams and death, conflict in defiance of truly crippling fear...only these can heal my boredom! Show me how brightly you shine as I destroy you, Kojou!”

“—Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou’s summoned lightning lion collided with the draconic Beast Vassal. The dragon’s head seemed to snap back as it rose up, scattering flames as it roared in anguish.

“I feel sorry for you, Vattler—”

“What...?”

“What are you *afraid of*...? The loneliness of being left all alone in the world? The sadness of losing someone you love? Or what, all of your emotions, your

joy, getting warped into despair?!”

Demonic energy erupting from Kojou’s body became pitch-black wings that swept Vattler’s flames away. This was the same power that Root Aurora had used once upon a time—the power of the genuine Fourth Primogenitor.

“You’re like some little kid. When things don’t go your way, you throw a tantrum and make trouble for other people ’cause you don’t know any better. You don’t build anything. You’re just chasing after momentary pleasure to forget about your boredom—if you think you can keep doing that forever, you’d better think again!”

“Ha-ha...!”

Vattler’s expression twisted into delight as the air at his back warped, with fresh Beast Vassals appearing one after another.

“Marvelous, Kojou. Your words are so refreshing! In all my years, not one of my enemies has said such a thing to me. Not even the other Primogenitors—! Manashi! Uhatsura! Anabadatta!”

“Shut up,” said Kojou with a low growl. “You’re not taking anything from anyone. I’m protecting the world you’re trying to destroy. From here on, this is my fight!”

One after another, Kojou’s wings transformed into Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. A scarlet bicorn, a bighorn sheep with a body of diamond, a minotaur, a silver-colored shelled beast—these collided with Vattler’s serpents head-on, scattering incredibly destructive impacts all around.

Fire and kicked-up dust obstructed Kojou’s field of vision. In an instant, an enormous shadow covered the area above Kojou’s head.

It was one of Vattler’s serpent Beast Vassals. It had employed protective coloration to hide from sight and sneak its way over. In a certain sense, the attack bore the cunning of a snake. However, Kojou’s expression showed no haste.

There was a flash of a silver blade above Kojou’s head, thrusting deep into the serpent Beast Vassal.

“—No, senpai. This is *our* fight!”

The skirt of Yukina’s uniform danced with a flutter as she landed at Kojou’s side.

“Future Sight of a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency? No, rather, you read my intent—”

Vattler raised his eyebrows in a show of admiration. He genuinely seemed to find it praiseworthy that Yukina, a mere human, had managed to drive his Beast Vassal back.

“This is so fun, Kojou. Such a beautiful battle. Show me more... Ananta...”

“What the...?!”

As he stared up at the final Beast Vassal summoned by Vattler, a vacant, flabbergasted look came over Kojou. It was not so much fear that struck him, but the urge to laugh out loud.

Before him stood an enormous tree stretching to the heavens.

The closest image he could liken it to was if the so-called World Tree had become a reality. However, the root of the tree, thrusting into the ground, was the wriggling tail of a snake. The trunk of the tree was the snake’s body. Its enormous branches ended in nine serpentine heads.

The nine serpentine Beast Vassals had intertwined to create a “serpent tree” reaching hundreds of meters in height. Its vast trunk and snake branches completely surrounded the ground upon which Kojou and Yukina stood. It was a virtual barrier of serpents.

“Such strong demonic energy...”

The sheer power radiated by the serpent tree threatened to overwhelm Kojou.

Dimitrie Vattler controlled nine Beast Vassals, but it was said that no one had actually seen the ninth in reality. Kojou finally understood why.

There was no way anyone had fought this Beast Vassal and lived—

Vattler also possessed the Ability to fuse his Beast Vassals. And they drew

upon the inexhaustible magical energy of the Earth. With this, he had likely achieved an overwhelming Ability that probably surpassed the Beast Vassals of the primogenitors. Vattler's words—that he didn't need The Cleansing to fight Kojou—hadn't been all talk.

“Senpai!”

“Stay back, Himeragi!”

The miasma emitted by Vattler's Beast Vassal spread throughout the barrier. The beautiful, golden miasma encroached upon Kojou's body, inflicting terrible pain upon it. With her Divine Oscillation Effect barrier deployed, Yukina was enduring the miasma, but the vampiric Kojou could not enter her barrier.

Vattler stood atop a serpent's stooped head, leisurely looking down at Kojou. Kojou's lips twisted in nervousness. The dragon lines Celesta had severed would likely recover within the next few minutes. Once that happened, Vattler would regain the power of The Cleansing, and then he would be impossible for Kojou to defeat.

However, Kojou could not defeat him with Beast Vassals.

“No, that's not...”

Gently closing his eyelids, Kojou laughed. In the back of his mind arose the eleven girls with identical faces, the eleven Kaleid Bloods. Through the Fourth Primogenitor's Blood Memories, their vast combat experience was teaching him how to defeat Vattler.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!”

Opening his eyelids, Kojou's eyes radiated the color of pale-blue flames. His hair turned into the hues of the rainbow, billowing like fire.

“—C'mon over, Beast Vassal Number Eight, Shaula Viola!”

Wringing out his remaining demonic energy, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. This was a manticore with wings and a scorpion's tail, enveloped by violet flames.

Kojou's body, invaded by the miasma, began recuperating at an incredible

rate. The manticore that governed all poison produced antitoxins within his blood, making his body recover from the miasma's encroachment on its own.

Furthermore, the manticore's abilities were not limited to poison alone—

The manticore sank its fangs into the enormous, serpentine trunk. Through those fangs, a near-infinite quantity of demonic energy coursed into Kojou's body.

Just like Vattler's serpent drained magical energy from the Earth, Kojou's manticore *stole the Beast Vassal's demonic energy from it*.

The manticore intercepted the serpents attacking it with wings turned blades, violet flames, and its scorpion tail. The demonic energy coursing into them increased the might of Kojou's other Beast Vassals as well. A stake of magma thrusting up from the ground tore the tree roots to shreds, and shock waves and blast winds mowed the branches down.

"To think you could resist Ananta to this extent!"

Vattler's smile cruelly twisted. The enormous serpentine "tree" sent all its branches bearing down upon Kojou in a combined, multi-wave attack. He no doubt meant to squash Kojou flat—and the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor along with him.

"My beloved Fourth Primogenitor, you are indeed the greatest of all! Now, die—!"

The swirling sea of enormous snakes encircled the space around Kojou and tried to constrict him. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor resisted this, but the overwhelming mass of the serpents pressed upon Kojou tighter and tighter.

Unable to use Fusion Beast Vassals, Kojou could not win against Vattler.

Not Kojou alone, at least—

"Senpai."

The nervous Kojou heard a voice in his ear.

Yukina, clutching her silver-colored spear against her chest, was standing extremely close to Kojou. Knowing that death was closing in before them, her

eyes were gentle and serene.

Untying the ribbon of her school uniform, she opened the collar of her sailor suit, revealing the distinct, delicate collarbone and pale flesh under it. Then, before the surprised Kojou, she exposed her slender neck.

“I am returning to you the Beast Vassal that Miss Hektos lent to me,” Yukina said as she pulled up the hair over her ear. The side of her face stole Kojou’s eyes.

“Himeragi...”

“You are mistaken.” Yukina sullenly glared at Kojou with half-lidded eyes.

“Huh?”

Her unexpected reaction threw Kojou for a loop. Making a small pout, she hung her head, speaking in a small, embarrassed-sounding voice.

“Just once is fine, but please, call me by my first name... Just like you do with Nagisa, with Aiba, and with Miss Aurora.”

For an instant, Kojou was taken aback; then he let out a tiny burst of laughter.

Here they were, with their own lives and the fate of the world hanging in the balance, and that was what bothered her. Somehow he thought it was just like her. Probably, save for them being in such a situation, she would absolutely never have spoken such selfish words.

For but a single second, they stared at each other in silence. Then Kojou reached his hand out to Yukina’s delicate shoulder.

“—Come, *Yukina!*”

“Yes!”

Which came first? Kojou moving to embrace her or Yukina leaping into his arms?

Enveloped by a sweet, flowery scent, Kojou sank his fangs into Yukina’s neck.

It was the very next moment that Vattler’s serpent Beast Vassals bore down upon the pair.

Without touching either of them, the onrushing serpents were sliced into

pieces and vanished. Dazzling, rainbow-colored flames glowed and enveloped Kojou and Yukina.

The flames flickered, transforming into the form of a beautiful Valkyrie.

“C’mon over, Minelauva Iris—!”

Gripping her rainbow-colored sword of light, the Valkyrie soared into the sky.

The sixth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, Minelauva Iris, wielded the power of Severing. Slicing apart the serpents, their fully charged demonic energy and the miasma alike, it kept going, arriving in the sky above the serpentine tree.

“It’s useless, Kojou,” Vattler declared, proud of impending victory. The holes Kojou’s Beast Vassal had gouged in the barrier were instantly sealed, buried by the undulating serpents. Escape from the serpentine barrier was impossible.

However, Kojou gave a relieved smile.

“C’mon over, Kiffa Ater!”

“...?!”

That wiped the smirk off Vattler’s face.

Kojou’s newly summoned Beast Vassal was an elegant and stupidly huge great sword, its blade surpassing hundreds of meters in length.

More precisely, its form was that of an ancient weapon known as a Vajra sword. It was said to be a Demon-slaying blade used by the gods themselves.

Due to its enormity, precise control was nigh impossible. It was an Intelligent Weapon useless for anything save smashing by using the raw force of gravity.

But it was not a human being wielding that great sword.

The Valkyrie Beast Vassal gripped the enormous sword, taller than she was, easily swinging it as if it weighed no more than a feather.

The enormous black blade’s Ability was Gravity Control, and the rainbow-colored Valkyrie was the Beast Vassal of Severing.

With a mighty roar, a black flash of light mowed down the dragon tree.

The Valkyrie's Ability of Severing sliced apart what tied Vattler's Fusion Beast Vassal together.

Split apart, the nine serpents, unable to withstand the volume of demonic energy amassed inside them, exploded. Kojou's own Beast Vassals formed a shield to protect him from the incredible storm of demonic energy raging about.

"Kojou Akatsuki—!"

Having lost his Beast Vassals, Vattler, wounded all over, leaped at Kojou.

His beautiful features completely transformed. His lips split, and a forked tongue poked out from them. His flesh became covered in hard scales, and his neck lengthened. His lower body had already transformed into a serpent's—bestialization.

"A...transformation?! So that's the ace up your sleeve—!" Kojou's voice shook with unease.

He was aware that some among the vampires possessed the Ability of bestialization. It wasn't rare for legends to speak of vampires changing into the form of a wolf or a bat, and Giada Kukulkin had once transformed to appear before Kojou's eyes in the form of Aurora.

However, Vattler's transformation took Kojou completely by surprise. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were too powerful to be of much use in close combat. Vattler was exploiting that weakness.

Completely transformed into the form of a snake, Vattler coiled his torso around Kojou's body. Fangs bared, his enormous head pressed toward Kojou, as if to swallow him whole from the head down.

"You and I shall become one, Kojou. As a new Fourth Primogenitor—"

Employing every last ounce of his vampiric strength, Kojou desperately tried to force back Vattler's head. However, Vattler's bestialized power overwhelmed Kojou. Vattler's jaw widened to encompass Kojou's upper body, the glossy, gleaming fangs bearing down before his eyes.

Kojou no longer had any means of escaping Vattler.

But this meant that Vattler could not move, either.

“Sorry, Vattler—*we win.*”

As Kojou smiled impetuously, the serene voice of a girl making a ritualistic chant reached his ears.

When Kojou needed her, Yukina would always be there for him. After all, she was his watcher—

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

“Ngh...”

Vattler’s serpentine body tried to flee from Kojou. But Kojou did not let him escape. A sinister smile came over his lips as he poured strength into the two hands holding Vattler’s maw.

In the corner of Kojou’s vision, Yukina danced beautifully.

She danced like a swordsman praying to the gods for victory or, perhaps, a priestess receiving a prophecy for that victory...

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

“It’s over, Vattler—!”

Kojou smashed a lightning-wreathed fist into Vattler’s lower jaw.

Vattler’s serpentine body reeled as Yukina’s silver spear ran through him.

Engulfed by the pale light that erased demonic energy, the serpentine body dissipated.

The only thing that remained was Vattler, wearing a bloody three-piece suit.

Lying on the ground, a silver spear impaling his heart, a smile of pure satisfaction was plastered across his face.

7

The ruined buildings drawn into Kojou and Vattler’s fight had turned into a mountain of rubble in a radius of several kilometers around. Even the distinctive

tower building and the elevated, monorail-like bridge had vanished.

Cain would probably be angry to see the legacy he'd bothered to leave reduced to such a state—at least, so Kojou imagined. Or perhaps he'd be pleased that the war had come to an end.

“You wouldn't rather finish me off, Kojou?” Vattler asked, the silver-colored spear still piercing his heart.

Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf was continued to send its demonic energy-nullifying Divine Oscillation Effect into his body. That Vattler was tough enough to speak calmly in spite of that made Kojou coil his tongue.

“I don't hate you *that* much.” Kojou gave an annoyed sigh.

With the sea separating them, he could see the still-undamaged Itogami Island floating on the opposite shore.

Vattler had managed to attack even the multinational armada on standby far at the water's horizon. It wouldn't have been strange for Itogami Island to have been wiped off the map at his whim. Even so, when Vattler had sent his Beast Vassals on a rampage, they had never attacked Itogami Island.

Slaughter was not what Vattler had desired. To the very end, he had acted only for the sake of the high-stakes combat he craved.

“The way you do things is ridiculously selfish, self-righteous, and a pain in the ass, but I do understand you were being serious.”

“What a pity. I was thinking that if it was you, being consumed would not be so bad...” Despite the serious tone of his words, Vattler cackled.

Kojou grimaced. A certain way of killing an unaging, undying vampire was to rob the opponent of his very existence—cannibalism. Even if someone begged him, no way in hell he was taking *Vattler's* Blood Memories.

That said, he couldn't just leave Vattler pinned to the ground forever. *What should I do?* thought Kojou with a headache when the air before him shifted.

Silver-colored mist increased in density, transforming into a pair of young men, wounded vampires of the Warlord's Empire.

“Kira... Jagan...!”

Kojou went on guard, moving his body in front of Yukina, who couldn't move while she kept Snowdrift Wolf embedded in Vattler.

However, even seeing this did not make Kira's and Jagan's expressions change. Both bent on one knee right there, deeply bowing their heads toward Kojou.

"We apologize profusely for our rudeness, Fourth Primogenitor. We have no desire to do battle against you any further."

"For granting His Excellency's desire, you have our appreciation."

Their surprisingly reverential demeanor left Kojou frozen, unsure of how to react.

Kira and Jagan drew closer to the fallen Vattler.

Kojou gave Yukina a glance, whereupon Yukina withdrew. The Fourth Primogenitor trusted that Kira's and Jagan's words had no ill intent and were not false.

As if it was no big deal, Vattler slowly sat up, spreading out his right palm as he did. However, nothing happened. Seeing this for himself, he laughed in visible amusement.

"So my power of The Cleansing has been sealed. As one might expect of the Priestess of Cain... She is quite powerful, worthy of being the Fourth Primogenitor's Blood Concubine."

"Concubine...?"

Kojou blinked hard as he parroted the word back. He didn't remember the Priestess of Cain—Asagi—becoming his Concubine. However, the fact remained that he couldn't have defeated Vattler without her cooperation.

"Am I mistaken?"

"Ah...you've got it wrong..."

Kojou's words awkwardly trailed off as he recalled the taste of Asagi's blood, which he had consumed only a short time prior. As he did, Yukina watched Kojou with a complex expression.

After laughing to himself for a time, he drew something small and metallic out of his breast pocket. It was an old key that was about the size of a small knife. The metallic glow it gave off resembled the sorcerous devices of the Sinful God that Kojou had once seen at Kannawa Lake.

“Regardless, I have enough power left to achieve my final objective.”

Vattler stabbed the sorcerous device into the ground. In that instant, hollow darkness, swallowing all light, spread like a wave beneath their feet.

Realizing the true nature of that darkness, Yukina shouted, “The encroachment of Nod?!”

“Vattler... Why, you...!”

“I intended to lose to you, you see. From the beginning.” Vattler looked back at the surprised pair with a cheerful smile.

The encroachment of Nod created by Vattler was not the incomplete version employed by the Knight of the Sinful God. If anything, it resembled the teleportation gates wielded by Natsuki.

Vattler intended to transfer himself to Nod, to the otherworld where the gods had once exiled Cain—

“The other-dimensional Earth to which Cain was once exiled, from which he obtained the knowledge of The Cleansing... I shall enjoy seeing what enemies await. It seems I shall not be bored for some time...”

The handsome vampire was pulled into the dimensional travel gate, vanishing from sight. Kira and Jagan followed suit.

The pitch-black gate that had swallowed them gradually faded and vanished. In the end, the only thing left was the Key stabbed into the ground. Finally, it became weathered and decrepit, and it crumbled.

For a while, Kojou stared blankly at what was left of the destroyed Key. However, stare for however long he might, Vattler and the others did not reappear. They had traveled to an unknown otherworld in search of new battles, a nuisance to others to the bitter end.

If, someday, they returned to the world on Kojou’s side once more, they

would likely be even more powerful foes, even further beyond the reach of others. But for the moment, the threat had passed. Strength drained from Kojou's entire body as he internalized that fact.

"S-so tired..."

"I imagine so."

Putting down her silver spear, Yukina lent the wobbly Kojou her support.

The pair ended up leaning on each other as they glanced up at the passing clouds. At some point, the sun had waned, granting the twilight sky a golden hue. The breeze blowing through the ruined city felt pleasant against Kojou's tired body.

"—*Kojou, can you hear me?*" came Asagi's voice from the wreckage of a robot tank.

The communications system was still receiving power. What appeared to be the cockpit had been crushed, so Kojou's and Yukina's voices could not reach her, but Asagi surely understood the pair's situation, more or less. And so, they continued to listen.

"Notification from the Holy Ground Treaty Organization. It says 'Recognition of Itogami Island as a large-scale sorcerous device has been revoked. We hereby recognize it as the territory of the Fourth Primogenitor—'"

"Good..."

Kojou and Yukina met each other's faces, sighing in relief. The HGTO had kept its word. Somehow, they had avoided both the annihilation of Itogami Island and the world being drawn into an all-out war.

"So hurry up and get back here. I'll be waiting—"

There was static as Asagi's voice cut out.

Kojou looked behind him. An Aldegian armored airship was floating against the dusk sky. La Folia had called for a pickup.

"Let's go, *Himeragi*."

Kojou called out to Yukina. However, Yukina did not reply. Still clutching her

spear, she simply stared at Kojou's face as if there was something she wished to say.

"Himeragi?"

"....."

"What's wrong, Himeragi?"

Kojou drew his brows close, staring at Yukina, confused. It was obvious that Yukina was in a sour mood, but he had no earthly clue why.

"Er...Miss Himeragi?" Kojou nervously revised his address.

Yukina, unresponsive to that point, finally uttered a deep sigh of resignation. Glaring at Kojou with a resentful look in her eyes, she spoke with a visible pout. *"Nothing at all, stupid senpai—!"*

What the hell was that for?! Kojou lifted his face toward the heavens.

Then, the two stood shoulder to shoulder and walked out into the ruined city.





OUTRO

OUTRO

At a family restaurant in the afternoon, powerful sunrays poured mercilessly from the large window facing the sea.

“So hot... I’m gonna burn. I’ll burn and turn to ash...”

A boy wearing the hood of his parka deep over his head was slumped against the table, seemingly trying to escape from those sunrays as he let out a frail moan.

Sitting beside him was a small-statured girl with a black guitar case placed at her side. In the seats opposite them were a boy with large headphones dangling around his neck and a girl with an extravagant hairstyle sipping on something.

Study materials for high schoolers were haphazardly placed on top of the table, covering English, math, Japanese, science, sociology. All the books were thick. The geometric problem in the notes spread before the first boy was left abandoned and unsolved.

Kojou lifted his head. “...Hey, technically, I’m king of a Dominion, right?” he asked as if he were soliloquizing.

“Well, I suppose so. That’s what it amounts to, technically,” Asagi Aiba replied, toying with her smartphone.

Kojou languidly put his cheek against his palm, gazing resentfully at the pile of study materials.

“So why am I here doing the homework from before fall break in a place like this? And isn’t this way too much homework?! Plus, I’m cleaning all the campus toilets and weeding all the grass as community service! Is this any way to treat a vampire primogenitor?!”

“Well, you don’t really have a choice...,” Motoki Yaze said through the straw in his mouth, a display of bad manners.

“You were already in trouble for absences when you straight-up skipped almost a whole month of classes from late February on. If you weren’t king, you’d be repeating the year for sure.”

“Like that could be helped! Damn that Natsuki; I told her I was so busy with all the formalities that came with joining the Holy Ground Treaty Organization and negotiations with the Japanese government that it nearly killed me—”

“Sure, you say that, but you’re pretty much worthless as a politician, Kojou. In the end, you were just doing whatever Big Bro Kazuma and the higher-ups of the Lion King Agency told you to—”

Asagi calmly laid out the facts. Setting aside how the way she said it burned him, he could not refute her.

“Then, I shouldn’t have had to attend to begin...”

“Please stop complaining and solve the problem before you. Do you wish to be in the same class as Nagisa and me, senpai?”

When Kojou sulked and turned his head away, Yukina Himeragi smiled. Kojou groaned, clutching his head as he turned back toward his homework once more.

About a month had passed since the Holy Ground Treaty Organization rescinded its attack on Itogami Island.

Through negotiations with the Japanese government, Itogami Island had been recognized as an independent nation; it had become a Dominion ruled by the Fourth Primogenitor. However, there would generally be free travel between it and Japan, making it possible to travel across the international border with about the same level of ease as moving into a new apartment.

Legal and financial affairs were completely left in the hands of the Japanese government, with Japanese police officers and Attack Mages maintaining law and order on the island. The majority of food imports and economic activities would continue to run through Japan. The gist being, nothing would change in terms of the citizens’ daily lives. In the end, Itogami Island was still Itogami Island, treated as a Demon Sanctuary just like before.

However, there had been changes, too. The presence of Cain’s legacy was

one.

The enormous artificial isle enveloping Itogami Island continued floating atop the sea perpetually. The Nalakuvera had all been destroyed in the fight against Vattler and company, but the pre-Cleansing technology Cain had left behind still remained. Aspiring immigrants were flooding to Itogami Island from all over the world in hope of researching that technology.

In contrast, the emigrants from Itogami Island were surprisingly few. Most corporations and researchers were not only unafraid of the Fourth Primogenitor's existence, they harbored a noncasual level of interest in him as a precious target for research.

Though the identity of the Fourth Primogenitor was a secret to the general populace, it was said that the Search for the Fourth Primogenitor! tour, a travel company project, was always sold out, leaving many to eagerly await cancellations to get a spot.

Though such talk was really annoying to Kojou, in that city, even the Fourth Primogenitor amounted to no more than that.

It was a Demon Sanctuary, after all.

"...Ah...well, that isn't good..."

Setting his empty drinking glass aside, Yaze put a hand to his ear. Apparently, he had detected an anomaly in the barrier he had deployed.

An avatar in the form of a badly sewn teddy bear popped up on the screen of the smartphone Asagi was toying with.

"Sorry, I'll miss. Emergency request from Natsuki."

"What, trouble again? What is it this time?"

Her partner AI's report made Asagi furrow her brows.

"Seems a sorcerous life-form summoned from another world has escaped from a lab in Island North, Stratum B. The Island Guard is tying it down, but they can't hold on forever."

Kojou's expression hardened as he overheard the report from Mogwai. "Island North, Stratum B. That's right next door to the hospital Aurora's in, isn't

it?”

Resurrected by transplanting her soul into the body of Hektos, Dodekatos—Aurora—continued to sleep, not opening her eyes even once since that day.

However, this was normal sleep to recover her depleted demonic energy. He didn’t know how many weeks or years it might take, but someday, she would awaken. As an immortal vampire, Kojou had been granted all the time in the world to wait for that—

“Guess I gotta head off to work...”

Twirling his headphones around his fingertips, Yaze, director of the board of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, rose to his feet.

“Well, I can at least evacuate people. Have fun taking on the sorcerous life-form, Kojou. You are the king, after all.”

Asagi spoke those words as she took one final bite of the pancake she’d been enjoying before regretfully parting from it. Just then, a crimson robot tank arrived to pick her up.

“Let’s go, senpai.”

With the guitar case slung over her back, Yukina reached a hand out to Kojou to hurry him along.

The silver ring gave off a soft glow.

Kojou shot a reproachful look at the mountain of unsolved problems and the family restaurant bill left on the table.

Outside the window stood an inorganic, artificial skyline. Spells running amok and sorcerous disasters were regular events on that island.

Itogami Island, the Demon Sanctuary—here, monsters were no special thing. Not even the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

“Gimme a break...”

Mumbling to no one in particular, the boy walked forward.

At his side stood the girl who watched over him.

Amid an evening sky, red as blood, the two cast long, parallel shadows as they melted into the artificial city.

Afterword

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 15 has finally hit store shelves.

As the final chapter of Part One, this volume is a bit long. Honestly, I was rather relieved to have stuffed it all in a single volume. Because of this, writing it was rather rough (as far as endurance goes), but if that made it more fun, I'm glad.

This volume finally allowed me to provide an answer to the question from the final episode of the *Strike the Blood* anime, "Why does Itogami Island look different?" It's a little thing, but personally, it always bugged me. Now I feel a sense of liberation, like a burden has been lifted from my shoulders.

Besides that, there are plenty of things I'd like to talk about, but destroying all these good feelings is kind of *meh*, so I'll save the insider stories and so forth for another time. Also, as for what was happening with the characters not addressed during this volume, I think some special attention in the next volumes should make up for it.

So this series has reached the fifteenth installment. Looking back on it all, it feels like it happened in the blink of an eye, and there were plenty of times when I felt like I wasn't writing enough. Reflecting upon the pace of my writing, I'd love to have pumped out the pages a little faster, and there are still numerous scenes I drew up that are waiting to be used. I don't know what form they'll take, but if the opportunity should arise, I think I'd like to actively write extra events that take place outside the main story.

Just as I said in the previous volume's afterword, this volume ends Part One of the *Dengeki Bunko* version of *Strike the Blood*. To everyone who stuck with me all this way, I truly, truly thank you very much.

Happily, projects related to *Strike the Blood* are still ongoing, so I believe you will be seeing new adventures for Kojou and Yukina in a variety of forms going

forward.

In turn, I want to prepare for new developments on the novel side of things, but nothing has been scheduled for this as of yet. I'll try to make sure it isn't too long of a wait.

By all means, please give me your best regards from here on.

To Manyako, the illustrator, thank you very much once again. The fifteenth volume was quite long, and even under these harsh conditions, you whipped up yet another superb cover illustration—Yukina by herself, bound by blue ribbon—for which I am truly grateful. To TATE, who's handling the comic version, let me borrow this space to offer you my thanks. The heroines were cute, and the combat scenes were terrific, and in every volume I was awestruck by how complete everything felt. Finally, to everyone involved in the publication of this book, and to all of you who have read it, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope to see you all again.

Gakuto Mikumo

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